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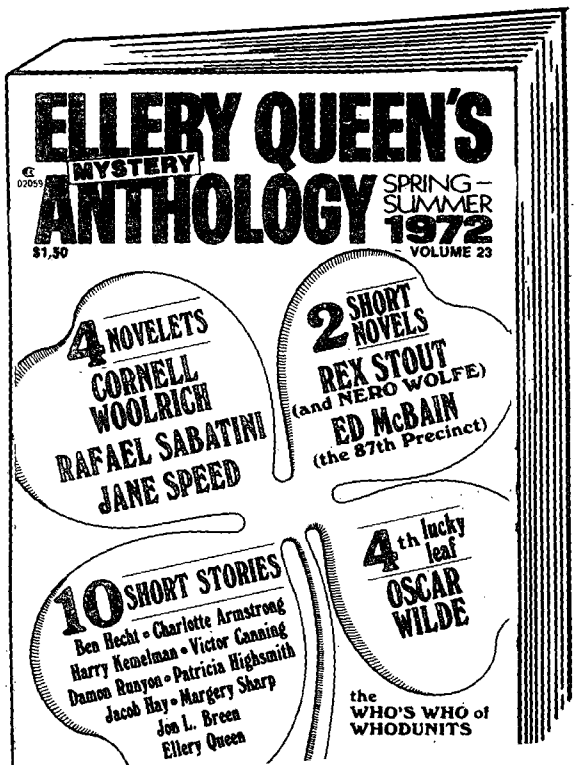

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 59, No. 5, Whole No. 342, MAY, 1972. Published monthly by Davis Publications, Inc., at 75¢ a copy. Annual subscription $9.00 in U.S.A., and possessions and Canada; $10.00 in the Pan American Union; $10.00 in all other countries. Editorial and General Offices, 229 Park Avenue South, New York, N. Y. 10003. Change of address notices, undeliverable copies, orders for subscriptions and other mail items are to be sent to 229 Park Avenue South, New York, N. Y. 10003. Office of Publication — 1 Appleton Street, Holyoke, Mass. 01040. Second-Class postage paid at Holyoke, Mass. 01040. *© 1972 by Davis Publications, Inc., All rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. Printed in U.S.A. Submission must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope: the Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.*

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J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

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Continuing the new series about George Gideon, Commander of the C.I.D. (the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard) . . . Gideon's men knew their Commander very well: in a seemingly trivial point, in an apparently unimportant fact, Gideon — to quote one of his Superintendents — "could see some major crime lurking" . . .

GIDEON AND THE VINTAGE CAR THEFTS

by J. J. MARRIC (John Creasey)

One of the most common crimes in the city of London—in fact, in nearly all the big cities of the world—is car stealing. Many hundreds of cars are stolen every week in London, most of them new and of popular makes, so that they can be sold easily.

The car thieves, often working in highly organized gangs, have a number of tricks to help them get the "hot" cars off their hands. But these tricks are well known to the police. If the engine number of a car has been filed off, infra-red rays can still reveal this number; if the car has been resprayed, it is easy to check how long the cellulose has been dry, and what color is underneath. For every car thief's trick there is a police countermeasure.

All this was known, as second nature, to Commander George Gideon of the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard. But Gideon seldom gave car thieves much thought, unless they reached a new high level, or unless they failed to fit into the normal pattern.

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He was a big, powerful, rugged man, with iron-gray hair, and as he entered the N.E. Divisional Police Headquarters one hazy autumn morning, the boards groaning under his deliberate tread, every man sprang to attention.

This time it was the Divisional Superintendent who committed a crime. He kept George Gideon waiting. Everyone in the station was on edge about this, except Gideon himself, who stood by the Superintendent's window and looked out into the station yard. Standing among the police cars was an old black Bugatti, a vintage model, beautifully painted, all its brasswork polished and gleaming.

The Superintendent, a tall thin man, came in.

"Sorry, Commander. I've been down in the cells talking to a fellow who all but strangled his wife last night."

"How does he feel about it now?" asked Gideon.

The Superintendent grinned. "He says he'll never forgive himself for not having finished her off!"

"The longer he cools his heels the better," said Gideon. "Anything much in, otherwise?"

"No. What's brought you?"

"Just dropped in to keep you on your toes," said Gideon dryly. "What's that old crock doing in the yard?"

"We picked it up this morning. It was reported stolen six months ago. Remember?"

Gideon did not remember, but he did not say so. He could recall reading of the theft and recovery of other vintage motor cars, however, from wire-wheeled Bentleys to Model T Fords; but this particular series of crimes had been so insignificant that he had taken little notice of it. Now his mind began to roam.

"Get the thief?" he inquired.

"Not yet."

"Where was it found?"

"In an old warehouse near the docks. We were looking for that hijacked load of cigarettes taken from Hyne's Wharf last night, and doing a routine check of the places it might be."

"Who gave the car all that spit and polish?"

"Well, the owner obviously didn't—and *we* didn't—so I suppose it must have been the fellow who pinched it."

"Bit peculiar," said Gideon thoughtfully. "I'd like to have a look in the warehouse. Can you spare the time?"

"For you, yes. For anyone else I'm working too hard as it is."

"Poor old chap," scoffed Gideon.

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Half an hour later the Commander was standing in the warehouse, gazing round at the high rafters, at the holes in the roof where slates had fallen through, at the high loading platform and the dusty floor. As the sun's rays filtered through the long window, lighting that corner of the warehouse where the vintage car had been found, his keen gaze fell on some pale flecks of congealed liquid. He bent down, touched one, and sniffed at his finger.

"Metal polish," he remarked.

"Yes, the thief worked on it all right, and he worked on it here," the Superintendent said. "Come and see this."

Gideon followed him to the loading section where the Superintendent leaned over a big cardboard box which contained polishing cloths, a jam jar with several paint brushes, a tin of black enamel paint, a cleaning powder, and various odd bottles and cans.

"We must try these for fingerprints," said Gideon. "Any prints on the car?"

"Plenty, but we haven't got any of them in Records."

"What have you done about it?"

"Sent a report—Colonel Riordan, the owner, is due to come and identify his property sometime today. But why are you so interested, Commander? It's a straightforward job. These old cars are worth a lot of money; they're kept in museums and private collections all over the country, and the more spit and polish the more valuable they are. It's as simple as that."

"Hmm," grunted Gideon. "Ask the owner if he could spare time to come and see me at the Yard, will you?"

"Don't tell me you see some major crime lurking behind this," said the Superintendent. "It's just a new form of the old game." When Gideon didn't respond he went on, "I'll give Colonel Riordan your message."

At half-past three that afternoon the old and tired building of New Scotland Yard was brightened by a boisterous, even flamboyant individual in a loud tweed suit and R.A.C. Veteran's tie.

"My name's Riordan, Colonel Riordan," he boomed in the hushed hall. "I believe you have a Commander Gideon here. He wants to see me."

Very soon Colonel Riordan had boomed his way into Gideon's office.

"Want to say thank you. Wonderful chaps, you police. Didn't think I'd ever see that car again. Congratulations. How much do I have to pay?"

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"Pay for what?" asked Gideon, a little overwhelmed.

"Reward, sir, reward! For getting the car back."

"You settle that when you pay your taxes," Gideon said. "Have you heard about the other old cars that have been stolen recently?"

"I certainly have!"

"Do you collect vintage cars?" asked Gideon.

"Have for years. Some people collect stamps, some collect jade, some collect paperweights. I collect old cars. Got fifty-three of them. Keep them on show mostly, but I always like to drive a different one each week. Shock of my life when this one disappeared."

"Have you had any others stolen?"

"Any *others*?" Colonel Riordan looked alarmed.

"Have you bought any of the stolen ones?" asked Gideon, with deceptive mildness.

Colonel Riordan gaped. "*Bought* them? Stolen cars? Good God, Commander, you must be mad!"

Gideon raised a soothing hand. "Can you think of any car collector who would buy a car, knowing it to be stolen?"

Colonel Riordan's eyes gleamed with excitement. He leaned forward. "I *see*. Like an art lover might buy a stolen painting, you mean. Buy it, knowing that he would have to keep it hidden, and that only he could enjoy it. Well, such connoisseurs may exist, but not in this line of business, Commander. The whole fun of owning an old crock is showing it off to the other fellow. There's no undercover buying in the vintage-car market, you can take it from me."

"If you're quite sure—"

"Take it from me," repeated Colonel Riordan. "It's like an exclusive club, Commander. If anyone pinches a car of mine, all the others in the game feel as if they've lost a car, too. There aren't any exceptions. And I know every owner, Commander, every collector."

"Who cleans and polishes these old cars?" asked Gideon.

"The owners, as likely as not—or their mechanics. But owner or mechanic, they all have the same sense of pride in looking after these antique cars. They treat them as if they were living creatures, and that's the truth of it. Cleaning and polishing is a labor of love."

Again Gideon looked deceptively innocent. "And what do you think of the condition of your Bugatti, Colonel?"

"Never seen it better!"

"A labor of love, perhaps," said Gideon softly.

"Absolutely, Commander! No doubt about it. A great deal

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of elbow grease and loving care went into maintaining the appearance of that car."

"So the thief must also have that sense of pride you were telling me about," murmured Gideon.

"What's that? Oh!" Colonel Riordan looked thoughtful. "I see what you mean. Couldn't have been stolen for resale and certainly couldn't have been driven about by the thief—he had to hide it somewhere and keep it to himself, by Jove! Undercover—just the kind of man I said we didn't have in the old crocks game. You've made your point!"

"There have been nine cases of vintage cars having been stolen," began Gideon, "and—"

"Everyone recovered in first-class condition!"

"That is so," agreed Gideon. "Now, no one who could afford to buy them would be likely to steal them, would they?"

"Deuced unlikely," Colonel Riordan agreed.

"And according to the reports no two have been stolen in the same period. So, assuming all of them were taken by the same person, the thief steals one, hides it, and takes care of it. Only after it has been recovered by the police does he steal another. So it looks as if his only object is to have a car—*any* car, providing it's vintage—that he can care for."

"Like these women who steal other women's babies!"

"Well, perhaps," agreed Gideon. "So we're looking for a man who loves vintage cars but can't afford to buy them."

Colonel Riordan was staring at him intently.

"Do you know of such a man?" asked Gideon flatly.

There was a few moments' pause.

"No," said the Colonel sharply. "No, sir, I do not."

He rose from his chair, as if suddenly anxious to leave.

"I'll be grateful if you'll let me know whether you hear of one," Gideon remarked. "He'll probably be the man we want."

"Yes, yes," said Colonel Riordan, almost impatiently. "I'll let you know, Commander."

"And one of these days I'd like to look over your collection," said Gideon, following him to the door.

The Colonel turned. "And so you shall, Commander, so you shall. I'll send you an invitation. Goodbye for now, sir. I hope you get your man."

But the police did not get their man, and in the next three months the investigation petered out, partly because of more urgent cases, partly because no more vintage cars were stolen. Early in the fourth month

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Gideon received an invitation to visit Colonel Riordan's Old Crock Museum, in a Surrey country town.

"And now for the moment of truth!" boomed Colonel Riordan, turning to Gideon after an excellent luncheon. "You are about to see the finest collection of old crocks in the western world!"

The collection certainly seemed to measure up to the Colonel's boast. Benz, Bentley, Hispano-Suiza, Duesenberg, there they were, vintage cars of all shapes, sizes, and makes. And each one shone. Brasswork, coachwork, chassis, wheels, engine, radiator, upholstery—outside and in, everything was bright and gleaming.

Acting as their guide was a man in his early forties whose eyes glowed, whose voice was eager, as he described the history, the virtues, of every car.

"Amazing chap," Colonel Riordan said to Gideon an hour later, as they walked back toward the house. "He's done practically all the work himself. Dotes on it. Bit peculiar in some ways, almost simple, you might say. But old crocks mean everything to him. I hired him as an odd-job man, actually—didn't trust him with the cars to start with, though he begged me to let him look after them. Used to polish most of them myself. But when I got the Bugatti back—and after our little talk, Commander"—Colonel Riordan paused, looking sharply at Gideon, who said nothing—"I let him take over completely. It's come off so far. Works his fingers to the bone."

"You're lucky to have such a man," Gideon said solemnly.

"I am indeed. By the way, Commander, did you ever catch the fellow we were talking about that day?"

There was a hint of laughter in the Colonel's eyes.

"No," said Gideon. "He's stopped operating. He's probably found the job he was looking for," he added mildly.

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VAN DER VALK AND THE MAN FROM NOWHERE

by NICOLAS FREELING

It had nothing to do with Van der Valk, and the uniformed branch that safeguards and protects the citizen would have told him to mind his own business had he interfered. There, if you like, lies the irony of this tale: to stop the man from being treated as a criminal, Van der Valk had to pretend he really was one. It is a Cautionary Tale—Harriet Who Played with Matches and Was Burned to Death.

Van der Valk was gossiping with the station brigadier on duty when X was brought in by a virtuous uniformed agent. A man of 50, perhaps 55, shabbily but not raggedly dressed, wearing American army boots. His hair and beard were cut amateurishly, but they were not offensive—indeed, the most striking thing about X was his cleanliness—like that of a slum cat.

Neither of them was busy, so two heads turned like inquisitive tortoises to inspect the new arrival.

"What's this?" said the brigadier with no great interest.

"No identity card, no means of identification at all. Refuses to give name, address—anything. No visible means of support. Refused to cooperate

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in any way. When told he could be charged with vagrancy he started to laugh. I wasn't having that, so I brought him in."

"Quite right," said the brigadier sternly. "Now, you—come over here. Now, if you want to avoid bad trouble you'd better not play dumb any longer. Name?"

"I haven't any."

The brigadier put down his pen with a snort.

"Search him."

It was not much help. The search produced such items as a needle and a length of cotton thread, a piece of kitchen soap, a fishing line, and five matches in a screw of paper. No unemployment card, no social security number—none of the precious bits of paper that officialdom regards as the only proof that we really belong to the human race and have not just blown in with cosmic dust still in our hair.

"Where d'you come from?"

"Nowhere."

"Where you headed for?"

"Nowhere."

"That's obstruction of justice as well as vagrancy. Lock him up." The offender was removed. "I suppose," said the brigadier thoughtfully, "I'd better get the psychiatrist to look at him—seems kooky to me. What am I going to put down as his name?"

"I'm going to drift," said Van der Valk with a yawn. "Put down X."

The brigadier looked at him with some suspicion: wit?

Back in his own office there was work waiting and Van der Valk forgot all about the incident. It was not till afternoon the next day that it crossed his mind. He lit a cigarette and smoked it to the end before deciding to reach for the telephone.

"Hello—brig? I'm inclined to think you made a lucky hit there yesterday. Yes, X. We've received some information—yes, Interpol. What? No, not legally in the country at all. Comes under Undesirable Aliens, *niet?* Quite. I'll take charge of him—daresay you'll be glad to get him off your hands, what? Right—send him over."

Van der Valk put the phone down, well pleased with himself.

When the man was brought in, the escorting policeman was carrying a pink cardboard folder—the dossier—which proved to contain the charge sheet, an inventory of all the odd objects he had been carrying, and the medical report. There were also a few notes under the heading Remarks: behaved quietly and gave no trouble; no requests or complaints; ate

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dinner and slept quietly; still refuses to divulge any personal information; not known to official records—fingerprints and identity photograph appended. They'd lost no time!

"Sit down." Van der Valk dismissed the policeman and picked up the medical report. It proved rather interesting.

"X is in good physical health, subject to the results of the usual tests and examinations. With the same reservations, he appears mentally normal. Outside the questions of his history and background, he was quite cooperative. Expresses no grievance against society. No perceptible lesion or trauma: memory appears intact. Intelligence above normal: appears, further, to be an educated individual. Answered questions on South American geography with interest and accuracy. When asked to write at will he produced what appears to be a poetry quotation. Handwriting literate, controlled, showing no aberration. No alcohol or drug addictions."

A sheet of paper was clipped to the form. Van der Valk glanced up, surprised in spite of himself.

"Racine! You quoted Racine?"

"Only a scrap—all I recalled," said X with a faint smile.

"Which one is it?"

"First few lines of *Athalie*," X replied colorlessly. No vanity, no slyness.

"A bottle of beer?"

"Thanks, but I don't drink."

"A cigarette? Don't smoke either? Okay, I'm going to tell you something—in confidence, which I know you'll respect. I'm not going to ask any questions, I suspect you of no crime, and I'm quite indifferent as to who you are: you don't correspond to any of our missing husbands or absconded financiers. But if you stay here there'll be no end to the scenes you've already witnessed. I think I can probably persuade my colleagues in the Aliens Branch that you don't belong in this country—this will help!"—tapping the quotation from *Athalie*.

"The magistrate would agree that rather than have you serve three days in jail for vagrancy—costing the public money, don't you see—it might be preferable to have you escorted to the frontier. After that it begins again—but the Mediterranean has a kinder climate than we have. I hope very much you get on all right—you might be surprised, later on, to find that a lot of people sympathize."

Again the faint smile, but no answer.

"Shoes all right? Need any

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clothes? No? Right you are, Mister X." Van der Valk leaned over with his hand out. The other shook it warmly.

"Now we'll telephone," Van der Valk said briskly. "Has it ever struck you that when one rings, the other fellow always answers?—just like a footman!"

Half an hour's work was all it took. At the end Van der Valk laughed, not unpleased with himself. The man had gone one better than the Army deserters and the AWOLs—he had become a citizen of nowhere . . . It would go on—the vagabondage, the psychiatrists, the puzzled police and irritable magistrates.

But in the end, Van der Valk thought, the fellow had a good chance of winning. And why not? Whatever one does, one is still, inevitably, a member of the human family.

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the *NEWEST* Nick Velvet by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Here is the 14th in the series about the most distinctive thief in contemporary crime fiction — Nick Velvet, the man with the smooth velvet touch, the fussy felon who steals only, as Nick himself describes it, "the odd, the unusual, the valueless." Assignment this time: to steal a big striped cat named Sparkle. And Sparkle was an unusual feline: she was the mascot, the beloved pet, of a man with whom few people in the world dared tangle. Nick dared . . .

THE THEFT OF THE MAFIA CAT

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Nick Velvet had always harbored a soft spot for Paul Matalena, ever since they'd been kids together on the same block in the Italian section of Greenwich Village. He still vividly remembered the Saturday afternoon when a gang fight had broken out on Bleecker Street, and Paul had yanked him out of the path of a speeding police car with about one inch to spare. He liked to think that Paul had saved his life that day, and so, being something of a sentimentalist, Nick responded quickly to his old friend's call for help.

He met Paul in the most unlikely of places—the Shakespeare garden in Central Park, where someone many years ago had planned a floral gathering which was to include every species of flower mentioned in the works of the Bard. If the plan had never come to full blossom, it still produced a colorful setting, a backdrop for literary discussion.

" 'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance,' " Paul quoted as they strolled among the flowers and shrubs. " 'And there is pansies, that's for thoughts.' "

Nick, who could hardly be called a Shakespeare scholar, had come prepared. " 'A rose by any other name would smell

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as sweet,' " he countered.

"You've gotten educated since we were kids, Nick."

"I'm still pretty much the same. What can I do for you, Paul?"

"They tell me you're in business for yourself these days. Stealing things."

"Certain things. Those of no great value. You might call it a hobby."

"Hell, Nick, they say you're the best in the business. I been hearing about you for years now. At first I couldn't believe it was the same guy."

Nick shrugged. "Everyone has to earn a living somehow."

"But how did you ever get started in it?"

The beginning was something Nick rarely thought about, and it was something he'd never told another person. Now, strolling among the flowers with his boyhood friend, he said, "It was a woman, of course. She talked me into helping her with a robbery. We were going to break into the Institute for Medieval Studies over in New Jersey and steal some art treasures. I got a truck and helped her remove a stained-glass window so we could get into the building. While I was inside she drove off with the window. That was all she'd been after in the first place. It was worth something like $50,000 to collectors."

Paul Matalena gave a low whistle. "And you never got any of it?"

Nick smiled at the memory. "Not a cent. The girl was later arrested, and the window recovered, so perhaps it's just as well. But that got me thinking about the kind of objects people steal. I discovered there are things of little or no value that can be worth a great deal to certain people at certain times. By avoiding the usual cash and jewelry and paintings I'm able to concentrate on the odd, the unusual, the valueless."

"They say you get $20,000 a job, and $30,000 for an especially dangerous one."

Nick nodded. "My price has been the same for years. No inflation here."

"Would you do a job for me, Nick?"

"I'd have to charge you the usual rate, Paul."

"I understand. I wasn't asking for anything free."

"Some say you're a big man in the Mafia these days. Is that true?"

Matalena shot him a sideways glance. "Sure, it's true. I'm right up with the top boys. But we don't usually talk about it."

"Why not? I'm an Italian-

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American just like you, Paul, and I think it's wrong to act as if organized crime doesn't exist. What we should do is admit it, and then go on to stress the accomplishments of other Italian-Americans—men like Fiorello LaGuardia, John Volpe, and John Pastore in government, Joe DiMaggio in sports, and Gian Carlo Menotti in the arts."

"I stay out of policy matters, Nick. I've got me a nice laundry business that covers restaurants and private hospitals. Brings me in a nice fat income, all legit. In the beginning I had to lean on some of the customers, but when they found out I was Mafia they signed up fast. And no trouble with competition."

"You must be doing well if you can afford my price. What do you want stolen?"

"A cat."

"No problem. I once stole a tiger from a zoo."

"This cat might be tougher. It's Mike Pirrone's pet."

Nick whistled softly. Pirrone was a big man in the Syndicate—one of the biggest still under 50. He lived in a country mansion on the shore of a small New Jersey lake. Not many people visited Mike Pirrone. Not many people wanted to.

"The cat is on the grounds of his home?"

Matalena nodded. "You can't miss it. A big striped tabby named Sparkle. Pirrone is always being photographed with it. This is from a magazine."

He showed Nick a picture of Mike Pirrone standing with an older, white-haired man identified as his lawyer. The Mafia don was holding the big tabby in his arms, almost like a child. Nick grunted and put the picture in his pocket. "First time I ever saw Pirrone smiling."

"He loves that cat. He takes it with him everywhere."

"And you want to kidnap it and hold it for ransom?"

Matalena chuckled. "Nick, Nick, these wild ideas of yours! You haven't changed since schooldays."

"All right. It's not my concern, as long as your money's good."

"This much on account," Matalena said, slipping an envelope to Nick. "I need results by the weekend."

They strolled a bit longer among the flowers, talking of old times, then parted. Nick caught a taxi and headed downtown.

Mike Pirrone's mansión was a sprawling ranch located on a hill overlooking Stag Lake in northern New Jersey. It was a

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bit north of Stag Pond, in an area of the state that boasted towns with names like Sparta and Athens and Greece. It was fishing country, and the man at the gas station told Nick, "Good yellow perch in these lakes."

"Might try a little," Nick admitted. "Got my fishing gear in back. How's Stag Lake?"

"Mostly private. If you come ashore at the wrong spot it could mean trouble."

Nick thanked him and drove on, turning off the main road to follow a rutted lane that ran along the edge of the Pirrone estate. The entire place was surrounded by a wall topped by three strands of electrified wire. As he passed the locked gates and peered inside, he saw the large sprawling house on its hill about two hundred feet back. The lake lay at the end of the road, and a chain-link fence ran from the end of the wall into the water. Mike Pirrone was taking no chances on uninvited guests.

Nick was studying the layout when a girl's voice spoke from very close behind him. "Thinking of doing some fishing?"

He turned and saw a willowy blonde in white shorts and a colorful print blouse standing by the back of his car. He hadn't heard her approach and he wondered how long she'd been watching him. "I might try for some yellow perch. I hear they're biting."

"It's mostly private property around here," she said. Her face was hard and tanned, with features that might have been Scandinavian and certainly weren't Italian.

"I noticed the wall. Who lives there—Howard Hughes?"

"A man named Mike Pirrone. You probably never heard of him."

"What business is he in?"

"Management."

"It must be profitable."

"It is."

"You know him?"

She smiled at Nick and said, "I'm his wife."

After his unexpected encounter with Mrs. Pirrone, Nick knew there was no chance for a direct approach to the house. He rented a boat in mid-afternoon and set off down the lake, trolling gently along the shoreline. No one was more surprised than Nick when he hooked a large fish almost at once. It could have been a yellow perch, but he wasn't sure. Fishing was not his sport.

The boat drifted down to a point opposite the Pirrone estate, and Nick checked the shoreline for guards. No one was visible, but through his binoculars he could see a group

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of wire cages near the main house. Since the cat Sparkle could be expected to sleep indoors, the cages seemed to indicate dogs—probably watch-dogs that prowled the grounds after dark.

Working quickly, Nick filled his jacket pockets with fish-hooks, lengths of nylon leader, and a folded and perforated plastic bag. A few other items were already carefully hidden on his person, but the binoculars and fishing pole would have to be abandoned. He used a small hand drill to bore a tiny hole in the bottom of the boat, then watched while the water began to seep in. He half stood up in the boat, giving an image of alarm to anyone who might have been watching, then threw the drill overboard and quickly headed the boat toward shore. In five minutes he was beached on the Pirrone estate; the boat was half full of water.

For a few minutes he stood by it as if pondering his next move. Then he looked up toward the house on the hill and started off for it, carrying his fish. Almost at once he heard the barking of dogs and suddenly two large German shepherds were racing toward him across the expanse of lawn. Nick broke into a run, heading for the nearest tree, but as the dogs seemed about to overtake him they stopped dead in their tracks.

Nick leaned against the tree, panting, and watched a white-haired man walking across the lawn toward him. It was the man in the picture—Pirrone's lawyer—and he held a shiny silver dog whistle in one hand.

"They're well trained," Nick said by way of greeting.

"That they are. You could be a dead man now, if I hadn't blown this whistle."

"My boat," Nick said, gesturing helplessly toward the water. "It sprang a leak. I wonder if I could use your phone?"

The man was well dressed, in the sporty style of the town and country gentleman. He eyed Nick up and down, then nodded. "There's a phone in the gardener's shed."

Nick had hoped to make it into the house, but he had no choice. As the lawyer led the way, Nick held up his fish and said, "They're really biting today."

The man grunted and said nothing more. He led Nick to a small shack where tools and fertilizer were stored and pointed to the telephone on the wall. Nick put down his fish and dialed information, seeking the number of a taxi company. He'd just got the operator when the fish by his foot gave a

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sudden lurch. He looked down to see a large striped tabby cat pulling at it with a furry paw.

"Sparkle," Nick whispered. "Here, Sparkle."

The cat lifted its head in response to the name. It seemed to be awaiting some further conversation. Nick bent to stroke it under the chin and saw the legs of a man in striped slacks and golf shoes. His eyes traveled upward to a broad firm chest and the familiar beetle-browed face above. It was Mike Pirrone, and he wasn't smiling. In his hand he held a snubnosed revolver pointed at Nick's face.

"To what do I owe this pleasure, Mr. Velvet?"

The house was fit for a don, or possibly a king, with a huge beamed living room that looked out over the lake. The furniture was expensive and tasteful, and Pirrone's blonde wife fitted the setting perfectly. She was much younger than her husband, but seeing them together one quickly forgot the difference in ages. Pirrone was approaching 50 gracefully, with a hint of youth that occasionally broke through the dignified menace of his stony face.

"He's the fisherman I told you about," Mrs. Pirrone said as they entered. Her eyes darted from Nick to her husband.

"Yes," Pirrone said softly. "It seems he was washed up on our shore, and I recognized him. His name is Nick Velvet."

"The famous thief?"

"None other."

Nick smiled. He still held the fish at the end of a line in one hand. "You have me at a disadvantage. I don't believe we've ever met."

"We met. A long time ago at a political dinner. I never forget a face, Velvet. It costs money to forget faces. Sometimes it costs lives. I'm Mike Pirrone, as you certainly know. This is my wife, Frieda, and my lawyer, Harry Beaman."

The white-haired man nodded in acknowledgment and Nick said deliberately, "I thought he was your dog trainer."

Mike Pirrone laughed softly and Beaman flushed. "He does have a way with the dogs," Pirrone said. "He's trained them well. But they only guard the place. I'm a cat fancier myself." As if to illustrate he bent and cupped his arms. Sparkle took a running leap and landed in them. "This cat goes everywhere I go."

"Beautiful animal," Nick murmured.

Pirrone continued to stroke the cat for a few moments, then put it down. "All right, Velvet," he said briskly. "What do you want here?"

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"Merely to use the phone. My boat sprang a leak."

"You're no fisherman," Pirrone said, pronouncing the words like a final judgment.

"Here's my fish," Nick countered, holding it up; but the don was unimpressed.

"You scouted my place and you managed to get inside. What for?"

"Even a thief needs a vacation now and then."

"You don't take vacations, Velvet. I investigated you quite closely a few years back, when I almost hired you for a job. I know your habits and I know where you live. Who hired you, and why?"

"I didn't even know this was your place till I met your wife this morning."

"I heard you call my cat by name, out in the shed."

Nick hesitated. Mike Pirrone was no fool. "Everybody knows Sparkle. You're always photographed with him."

"Her. Sparkle is a her."

Harry Beaman cleared his throat. "What do you plan to do with him, Mike? If you try to hold him against his will it could be a serious legal matter. So far you've been within your rights to treat him as a trespasser, but that could change."

Pirrone threw up his hands. "Lawyers! Things were simple in the old days—right, Velvet?"

"I wouldn't know."

A maid appeared with cocktails and Pirrone waved his hand. "You're a guest here, Velvet. You arrived in time for the cocktail hour." He took a glass himself and went off to an adjoining study to make some phone calls. Nick wondered what Pirrone had in mind for him.

Frieda Pirrone rose from the sofa and came to sit by him. "You should have told me you wanted to meet my husband. I could have arranged it much more easily. Are you really a thief?"

"I steal women's hearts, among other things."

Her eyes met his for just an instant. "It would take a brave man—or an idiot—to steal anything from Mike Pirrone."

"I'm neither of those." He watched Sparkle move slowly across the carpet, stalking some imaginary prey.

"Just what sort of thief are you?"

"Sometimes I'm a cat burglar."

"Really? You mean one of those who climbs across rooftops?"

Before he could answer, Pirrone returned and handed his lawyer a sheaf of papers. "Business can be a bore at times, Velvet. I'm being a poor host."

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"Perfectly all right. Your drinks are very good."

The dark-browed don nodded. "My chauffeur will be driving Harry to the train shortly. You're free to leave with them."

"Thank you."

"But one word of advice. If anything turns up missing from this house—now or later—I'll know just where to look. I'll send somebody for you, Velvet, and it'll be just like the old days. Understand?"

"I understand."

"Good! Whoever paid you, tell them the deal is off."

Nick nodded. He needed to be careful now. There would be no other chance to enter the Pirrone domain. Whatever the risk, he had to take Sparkle out of the house with him. He glanced at his watch. It was just after five. "Could I use your bathroom?"

Mike Pirrone nodded. "Go ahead. The maid will show you." Then, as Nick started to follow her, the don called out, "Taking your fish with you? Now I've seen everything!"

The maid waved him into a large tiled bathroom and departed. Nick checked his watch again. He had perhaps three minutes before they would grow suspicious. Quickly he crossed to the door and opened it. As he'd hoped, Sparkle had followed the trail of the fish and was hovering in the hall. With a bit of coaxing Nick had her in hand. He only hoped Pirrone wouldn't come looking for her right away.

Close up, Sparkle was a handsome feline, uniquely spotted and with a curious expression all her own. Perhaps that was why Pirrone liked her—because she was one of a kind. Nick held her firmly and injected a quick-acting sleeping drug. Sparkle gave one massive yawn and curled up on the floor. Then, working fast, he wrapped the disposable syringe in a tissue and put it in his pocket. He lifted Sparkle's limp body and slipped it into the perforated plastic bag.

Carrying the cat in one hand, Nick opened the bathroom door again and glanced down the hall toward the living room. No one was in sight. He crossed the hall quickly, entering a spare bedroom which he hoped was the room he sought. From the road he'd observed the telephone line running up the hill to the house and he thought it reached the wall just outside this room. Opening the window he saw that he'd been correct. The phone wire was just above his head, about a foot beyond the window.

He removed two fishhooks from his pocket and attached

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one to each end of a length of nylon leader. Reaching up he looped the fishing leader over the telephone wire and left it dangling there while he lifted the plastic-bagged cat. The fishhooks snagged two of the perforations in the bag and held it dangling beneath the telephone wire.

Nick tested it for weight, drew a deep prayerful breath, then gave the bag a shove. It began to slide slowly down the phone line, across the wide side yard, and finally over the wall to the telephone pole by the road. Near the pole the bag came to a stop, but by carefully tugging on his end of the wire Nick was able to propel it over the last few feet.

He sighed and closed the window. The whole operation had taken him four minutes—one minute more than he'd planned. He went back to the living room, still carrying his fish, and saw at once that Pirrone and Frieda and the lawyer were waiting for him. A large man in a chauffeur's uniform stood by the door.

Mike Pirrone smiled slightly and brought out the snubnosed revolver once more. "I hope you'll excuse the precaution, Velvet, but we don't want you leaving with anything that doesn't belong to you. Search him, Felix."

Nick raised his arms and the chauffeur ran quick firm hands over his body. After a few seconds he yanked one hand away; it was bleeding. "Damn! What's he got in there?"

"Fishhooks," Nick answered with the trace of a smile. "I should have warned you."

Felix cursed and finished the search. "He's clean, Mr. Pirrone."

"All right." The don put away his gun. "You can go now, Velvet."

"Thanks," Nick said, and started to follow the chauffeur and Beaman to the car.

He was halfway down the front walk when he heard Pirrone ask his wife, "Where's Sparkle?"

Nick kept walking steadily, glancing across the wall at the distant telephone pole and its hanging plastic bag. "I think she went outside," Frieda answered.

Suddenly Pirrone called, "Velvet! Hold it!"

Nick froze. The chauffeur, Felix, had turned toward the don, waiting for instructions. "What is it?" he asked as Pirrone came down the walk.

"That fish—let me have it. You could have hidden something small inside it. And if you didn't it'll make a nice supper for Sparkle."

Nick handed it over with

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feigned reluctance, then climbed into the car with Beaman. On the drive into town the white-haired lawyer tried to smooth things over. "You have to understand Mike. He's a real gentleman, with a heart of gold, but he lives in constant fear of rivals trying to take over what he's spent his life building."

"I assumed he had something to fear when I saw the gun," Nick said, nodding.

Beaman went on, "Frieda doesn't like it. She doesn't like anything connected with his old life, but Mike has to be careful."

"Of course."

Beaman dropped him at the marina and went on to the station. Shortly after dark Nick drove back to the Pirrone estate, climbed the telephone pole outside the wall, and removed the perforated plastic bag from the overhead wire. The cat was still sleeping peacefully. From inside the wall Nick could hear one of the servants calling for Sparkle.

Paul Matalena was overjoyed. "Nick, I never thought you could do it!" He stroked the cat on his lap and listened to it purr. "How in hell did you manage it?"

"I have my methods, Paul."

"Here's the rest of your money. And my thanks."

"You realize that Sparkle is a unique cat. She's been photographed with Pirrone a hundred times, and could hardly be mistaken for anyone else's pet. When people see it they'll know it's Pirrone's."

"That's exactly the idea, Nick."

"If you're planning to hold Sparkle for ransom you're playing with dynamite."

"It's nothing like that. In fact, I only want the cat for a meeting tomorrow afternoon. Then you can have her back. If Pirrone recovers his pet within a day, the whole thing shouldn't upset him too much."

"You mean you only want Sparkle for one day?"

"That's right, Nick." Matalena went to the phone and started making calls. The hour was late, but that didn't seem to bother him. Sparkle watched for a time, then ran over to Nick and rubbed against his leg. Suddenly, listening to Paul's words on the telephone, Nick knew why his old schoolmate was willing to pay $20,000 to have Sparkle for one day. He looked at Paul Matalena and chuckled.

"What's so funny, Nick?"

"Paul, you always were something of a phony, even back in school."

"What?"

Nick got to his feet and

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headed for the door. "Good luck to you."

The following evening, as Nick sat on his front porch drinking a beer, Gloria called to him. "Telephone for you, Nicky."

He went in, setting down his beer on the table near the phone. She grabbed it up at once and wiped away the damp ring. Grinning, he said, "You're acting more like a wife every day."

The voice on the phone was soft and feminine. "Nick Velvet?"

"Yes."

"This is Frieda Pirrone. My husband is on his way to kill you. He thinks that somehow you stole Sparkle."

"Thanks for the warning."

"I don't want him to go back to killing, back to the way it used to be."

"Neither do I," Nick said. He hung up and turned to Gloria.

"Trouble, Nicky?"

"Just a little business problem." He bit his lip and pondered. "Look, Gloria, I've got a man coming over to see me. Why don't you go to a movie or something?"

"That was no man on the phone, Nicky."

"Come on," he grinned. "Ask no questions and I'll buy you that little foreign sports car you've been wanting."

"Will you, Nicky? You really mean it?"

"Sure I mean it."

When she'd gone he turned out all the lights in the house and sat down to wait. Just before ten o'clock a big black limousine pulled up and parked across the street. Nick had always considered his home to be forbidden territory, away from the dangers of his career; but this time it was different. Two men left the car and crossed the street to his house. One was the chauffeur, Felix. The other was a burly hood Nick didn't recognize. Mike Pirrone would be waiting in the car.

As they reached the porch Nick opened the door. Felix's hand dived into his pocket and the hood grabbed Nick, who didn't resist when they forced him back into the house. "I want to see Pirrone," Nick said.

"You'll see him." While the hood pinioned Nick, Felix went to the door and signaled across the street. Mike Pirrone left the car and came slowly up the walk, studying the house and the tree-lined street.

"Nice little place you have here, Velvet."

"Good to see you again so soon."

"Did you think you

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wouldn't?" He stepped close to Nick, "Did you think I'd let you get away with Sparkle?"

"No. Not really."

"Where is she?"

"Right here—I'll get her."

"No tricks." Pirrone had drawn his gun again, and this time he looked as if he meant to use it.

"No tricks," Nick agreed. He stepped into the kitchen with Felix at his side and called, "Sparkle!"

The big striped tabby came running at the sound of her name, rubbed briefly against Nick's leg, then bounded into Pirrone's waiting arms. He put away the gun and stroked her fur while he carefully examined her.

"All right," he said quietly. "Sparkle is all right, so I'll let you live. But Felix and Vic here are going to teach you a little lesson about stealing from me."

"Wait!" Nick said, holding up his hand. "Can't we talk this over?"

"There's no need for talk. You were warned, Velvet."

"At least let me tell you a story first. It's about the man who hired me to steal Sparkle."

"Tell me. We'll want to pay him a visit, too."

Nick started to talk fast. "You might almost call this a detective story in reverse. Instead of discovering a guilty person, I found one who's innocent."

"What are you talking about, Velvet?" Pirrone's patience was wearing thin.

"The man who hired me, who shall be nameless, runs a highly profitable business in New York City. He was able to establish the business, and maintain it profitably for years, mainly by convincing both his customers and his competitors that he is an important member of the Mafia."

Mike Pirrone frowned. "You mean he isn't one?"

"Exactly," Nick said. "He is not a member of the Mafia, never has been. He's a simple hard-working guy who took advantage of his Italian name and the fact that many people are willing to believe that any Italian in business must be in the Mob. By fostering the idea that he had important Syndicate connections, he got a lot of business from people who were afraid to go elsewhere.

"But recently some of his customers began to have doubts. The word started circulating that he wasn't a big Mafia man at all. Faced with the loss of his best customers he decided to call a meeting to keep them in line. Ideally, he would have liked someone like Mike Pirrone with him at the meeting. But since he didn't

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even know Mike Pirrone he settled for the next best thing—Mike Pirrone's cat."

"What?" Pirrone's mouth hung open. "You mean he had the cat stolen so he could con people into thinking he was a friend of mine?"

Nick Velvet smiled. "That's right. It was worth my fee of $20,000 to keep his customers in line. He showed up at the meeting today with Sparkle in his arms. Naturally, in an audience like that, all of them knew the cat by sight—and they knew that Mike Pirrone couldn't be far away. It convinced them."

"Didn't he think I'd hear about something like that?"

"Possibly. But by that time you'd have Sparkle back safe and sound, and you'd probably be reluctant to admit the theft to anyone."

"Tell me this guy's name."

"So you can beat him up or kill him? Where's your sense of humor? You have Sparkle back and the man has his customers back. No one's been harmed, and there's a certain humor in the situation. At a time when the Mafia is taking great pains to deny its existence, here is someone cashing in on the false story that he belongs to the Mafia. In fact, it was his open talking about it that made me suspicious in the first place. The real dons don't brag about it."

Felix shifted position. "What should I do, Mr. Pirrone?"

Pirrone studied Nick for a moment, then smiled slightly. "Let him go, Felix. You've got one hell of a nerve, Velvet—you and the guy who hired you." He started out of the house, but then paused by the door. "How did you do it? How did you get Sparkle out of my house?"

"Sorry. That's a trade secret. But I'll give you a tip about something else."

"What sort of tip?"

"Your watchdogs have been well trained by Harry Beaman."

Pirrone shrugged. "He likes them, I guess."

"He called them off me, and he could call them off his friends, too, if they happened to come visiting you late some night."

"I trust Harry," Pirrone said quickly, but his eyes were thoughtful.

"Think it over. You might live a few years longer."

Pirrone took a step forward and shook Nick's hand. "You've got a brain, Velvet. I could use someone like you in the organization."

Nick smiled and shook his head. "Organizations aren't for me. But remember me if you ever need anything stolen. Something odd or unusual"—Nick grinned—"or valueless."

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a *NEW* Ed Gorgon story by

JON L. BREEN

The 1972 baseball season is now in full swing (meaning the hitters are ahead of the pitchers). And Ed Gorgon, major league umpire, is back, this time calling plays at third base—and "calling shots" on a murder that happened during spring training. You didn't hear about it? Well, here are the facts, all the facts, and you don't have to be a disher of diamond dirt or know league lingo to match wits with Ed Gorgon . . .

THE BODY IN THE BULLPEN

by JON L. BREEN

Gus Adams had all the tools, as we say in baseball. He had a great eye and a picture swing. He was one of the best natural hitters I ever saw and he could run like a deer. He had a throwing arm like a rifle, nearly as good as Roberto Clemente's. True, he was no great shakes at fielding his position in the outfield, but he could get the job done there, too, when he wanted to. But even before the spring when Gus Adams died, we all knew he'd never make the Hall of Fame, because for all his talent Gus didn't give 110 percent. He didn't even give 100 percent. The way sportswriters compute these things, I figure Gus gave maybe 82, 83 percent on a good day. We all knew this was so, but very few of us knew why.

My name is Ed Gorgon. I'm a professional umpire. As such, I try to keep out of squabbles between teams and players, not wanting to tarnish my objectivity. But everybody who followed baseball in the papers knew a lot about the internal problems on the New York club—the problems had developed the year before, when the team had fallen apart in September and blown the divisional championship; and when the club gathered in Florida for spring training it

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didn't take long for the problems to flare up again, in the clubhouse, on the field, and most explosively, in the newspapers.

To put it simply, Gus Adams had been chosen as the scapegoat for the team's failure of the year before. True, he'd hit .309; true, he'd hit 19 homers and driven in 90 runs; true, he'd stolen 24 bases. But he'd also failed to run out ground balls and played defense in an irritatingly casual manner, misjudging fly balls and on a couple of occasions dropping them while trying for one-handed shoestring catches. If he'd been really trying, people said, he'd have hit .400, 50 home runs, had 150 RBI's, stolen 50 bases, and thrown out 100 batters at home plate, and New York would have won the Eastern Division by 20 games, instead of losing it ingloriously by six.

Clubs are supposed to come to spring training optimistic, hopeful, and cheery. But New York's fans, ball players, and sportswriters were in an ugly mood, scandalized that Gus Adams hadn't been traded to some other team during the off-season. (The truth, the front office stated, was that nobody wanted him.)

A few words about spring training: the parks the teams play in are seldom anything like real major league parks. If they were, the murder of Gus Adams could never have happened—at least, not in the way it did. In this particular park, the New York home field for spring games, the bullpens are behind a fence in the outfield, as they are in many big league parks; but the fence is only about five feet high. The bullpen of New York is in the left-field corner. It's usually full of a swirling dust that would make it rough for any asthmatic New York relief pitchers.

The day of the murder, Gus Adams is playing left field as usual, and in his usual nonchalant manner, even more pronounced since it's spring and games count for nothing in the standing. Most guys figure the paying fans for these games deserve to see a little baseball for their money, but for the most part Gus does not consider this important.

I'm working this game at third base. It's spring training for umps, too, and I'm working on getting my eye in shape—also my throat, which today is sore from yelling at the New York manager the day before. If he tries to test my tonsils today, I have decided he'll get a fast thumb—laryngitis is no more welcome to an umpire than to an opera singer. The

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voice is important—it's one of our greatest weapons in keeping control of the game.

Out in the left-field New York bullpen I see four guys. During the season there would probably be more, but the manager knows just who he expects to use in a spring game; in this case it's his starter for three innings, his long reliever Fred Salmonberry for the middle three, and his star short man Sam Todd for the last three. So Salmonberry and Todd are out there, along with Nark Wilcox, the pitching coach, and Art Coyle, the bullpen catcher. The four of them are out there playing mumblypeg, a form of recreation I haven't noticed them engaged in before. You have to do something out there—tell stories, talk baseball, write a book, even watch the game.

The four are easy to distinguish even from a distance. Fred Salmonberry is well cast for a long man—he's six foot five and skinny, an eight-year veteran who came to New York in an off-season deal. Once he was considered a great young pitching prospect, but now he's struggling to hang on, more noted as a "student of the game" than as a pitcher. The next bullpen author maybe? Salmonberry had a kind of book going for him: extensive notes on every hitter in the league, as if studying the hitters' styles will make up for the zip that's gone from his arm.

Sam Todd, a little black man with a gymnast's build, saved 23 games for New York last year and won 12 more—of current relief aces he's the top of the heap.

Nark Wilcox, the coach, is red-faced, short-haired, and potbellied, looking like the local sheriff in a small Mississippi town. He was a good left-handed pitcher in his day and had a potbelly even then.

Art Coyle is a little guy like Todd but more stockily built. His hair is long and blond—not long compared to what you see on the streets these days but by baseball's conservative standards it's hippie length. Coyle is not a natural catcher—he first signed as an outfielder a few years back but is one of those fellows who learned several positions in an effort to prolong their major league careers.

So there's the four of them and for the first inning it's a routine game. As it turns out, not much more than one inning is all that gets played. In the top of the second Jack Forrest, the big home-run slugger, comes to bat for the visitors. I notice that even the mumblypeg game stops in the bullpen so that the

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crew there can watch Forrest swing. I've heard ballplayers say they'd pay to see this guy hit.

The second pitch he gets a hold of—it's a long fly ball out to left, near the corner. To my great surprise Gus Adams goes after it with uncharacteristic speed. He chases it to the bullpen fence and it looks like a sure homer, but Adams makes a leap for it at the fence and gloves it. It's the most spectacular fielding play I've seen in spring training.

But Adams is coming down on top of that five-foot fence and it's clear he's going to fall over backwards into the bullpen. The four guys there rush forward to break his fall. I'm watching very carefully to see if he keeps the ball in his glove long enough to call the batter out.

All five of them go down in a tangled heap and a cloud of dust in the bullpen. Adams appears to hold the ball and I call the hitter out. The crowd's going nuts, the great play making them forget that the man who made it is the despised Adams who, only the inning before, has failed to run out a slow ground ball to the infield.

I'm pondering the mystery of why Adams made such a great effort on the fly ball. But a greater mystery is to follow. Four men get up from the bullpen dust. Gus Adams does not. The New York trainer and I get out there simultaneously —the trainer's got farther to run from the dugout, but he's a younger and fitter man than old Ed.

The four bullpen men are standing around, looking generally bewildered and shocked.

Gus Adams is dead, the mumblypeg knife neatly and accurately stuck in his back.

We call the game. During the regular season the show might go on, but this is the spring.

From what I've seen, and I had as good a view as anybody, any one of the four guys in the bullpen could have killed Gus Adams. It seems hard to believe, but each man denies doing it and also denies knowing who did do it. Is there a conspiracy involved here, I wonder? Probably none of the four had much use for Gus Adams, the club's prize scapegoat.

The local deputy sheriff who comes to take charge of the investigation is an old buddy of mine, Albie Manners, a bit of a red-neck but a decent sort basically. He knows I've developed a reputation for solving crimes, a talent that comes naturally to an umpire, I feel, and lets me sit in on his

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interrogations of the four suspects. I'll tell you a little—not every word, but enough—of what we learn.

Nark Wilcox.

"Who had the knife last, Coach?" Albie asks.

"I don't know. Last I saw, it was lying on the ground."

"Did you see who stuck it in him?"

"No, I don't have any idea. When we all went to catch Adams our legs got tangled up and we fell down. All I saw was sky and dust."

"Coach, how could four well-coordinated men not catch a man like that without falling over? Sounds funny to me."

"Yeah, you're right. Maybe we were tripped. I mean, maybe the guy that did it made the rest of us fall."

I'm expecting Albie to ask Nark if he recognized the leg that tripped him, but instead he asks, "What did you think of Adams?"

Wilcox hesitates, looks uneasy. "A great natural talent."

"But everybody on the ball club hated his guts."

"I don't know. Some guys resented him because he didn't hustle. The skipper always would put him in the lineup because we needed his bat. When he didn't give all he had, some of the fellows riding the bench would say, if he doesn't have to go all out, why should I? It was a bad morale situation all around."

"Did you hate him?"

"I don't hate people, Deputy. I'm a Christian. The Bible says not to hate, and I don't. I know Gus's problem was something deep inside him that made him hate the game of baseball, but he still played it because he didn't know anything else."

"What was the something, Coach? Do you know?"

"Yes." This surprises me because I didn't know what Adams' problem was and never talked to anybody who does. "One time, in the minors, in Higby Springs, Montana, he killed a man in a ball game. Hit a screaming line drive back to the box and nearly decapitated the pitcher. It wasn't big news because it was in the minors, and Gus Adams' name meant nothing then anyway."

"I've always been afraid I'll see a man die in a baseball game," I say. "God knows it could happen, the way these kids throw nowadays, and being a pitcher out there is like being at both ends of a shooting gallery—you can kill and be killed."

"I didn't know it was so dangerous," says Albie.

"Well, it is!" Nark Wilcox

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snaps. "I've had my head nearly knocked off by line drives and I've beaned a few guys, too—by accident, you understand."

Albie changes the subject. "Why do they call you Nark?" There's a nasty undercurrent in Albie's voice, like he's sniffing for drugs.

"Not what you think. It just means spy. I was on a club in the minors once when the players thought I was an informer for the front office. I wasn't. It was tough."

"Kind of an unpleasant name to be called by, Coach. Why did you keep it?"

"I wore it like a badge of honor," says Nark dramatically. "Pretty soon they called me 'Nark' in a friendly way. And they still do."

Albie can understand that. He's wearing one of those little pig tieclips that say "Pride-Integrity-Guts" on them.

Sam Todd.

"I hated his guts. I'll admit it. I worked my backside off for this club last year. And because of him we lost. It was worse because he was a brother, you know?"

I can readily understand the little reliever's feelings. To me, Albie Manners might be called a brother, another Southerner. And all through the interview I'm hoping Albie won't embarrass me by calling Sam Todd "boy" or some other offensive name, something he might do without even thinking about it. But Albie doesn't do it, so I figure he's looked at his calendar recently and knows times have changed.

"If you knew who stuck him," Albie asks, "would you tell?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I mean, is my duty to my friends or to my skin color or what?"

"It's to the law, as a good citizen."

Sam grins. "Well, anyway, man, I don't know who stuck him. Somebody tripped me up and I got dust in my eyes. It could have been any of the other three. I just know it wasn't me."

"Who brought the mumbly-peg knife to the bullpen?"

"It was Salmonberry."

"Were he and Adams friendly?"

"I don't know about friendly. They talked a lot, I think, because they both loved to gamble. They were always making bets on crazy things. I think Salmonberry got along with Gus as well as anybody."

Fred Salmonberry.

"I can't say we were friends exactly, but I talked to him. I wasn't with this club last year, so I don't have the bitter

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feelings about Gus these other guys have, and I didn't like the way they all gave him the cold shoulder."

"We hear you made a lot of bets with Adams."

Salmonberry grins. "Yeah, he liked to gamble and so do I. We bet on a few things—silly things mostly. How many blondes would walk through the hotel lobby in a given period. Whether anybody would hit a car in the parking lot with a home run during batting practice and what color car he'd hit. Stuff like that.

"Who hated Gus enough to kill him?"

"Nobody I know of. How could anybody hate anybody that much just over a baseball game? It don't figure."

Art Coyle.

"I'd have had a shot at the left-field position with him out of the way, Sheriff. And I'd play it like a maniac. Hell, I *will* play it like a maniac now if I get a chance to. Make something out of that if you want to. A motive, huh?"

"Did you hate Gus Adams?"

"I didn't love him."

"Ed," Albie asks me, "do you think a man would kill a teammate just to get a chance to play his position?"

"He'd have to be quite a competitor," I answer.

"This game gets in your blood!" Art Coyle says with feeling. "Sure I'd kill a man to get a chance to play if he was a no-good bum like Gus Adams!"

"You seem awfully anxious to make yourself a suspect, son," says Albie.

Coyle laughs. "Force of habit. It comes from fighting for a position all these years. I just want to make the team."

"You have. Did you kill him?"

"No."

"Do you know who did?"

"If I did I'm not sure I'd say. I'm not one to bite the hand that feeds me."

So there's the four suspects. The three monkeys—see-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil—and a fourth who *is* the evil.

I think I know who it is.

I also think that Albie isn't going to get to the bottom of it, not being a baseball man, so I do a little telephone investigating. I call the daily paper in Higby Springs, Montana, and have them read me their story on that tragic incident a few years back. The dead pitcher's name was Carl Mossman, but his mother's name is a familiar one, and I think I've picked the right killer. I don't take steps to catch him myself, since as an umpire I don't fraternize with ballplayers even to accuse them

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of murder—it may make me an unsatisfactory amateur detective, but it also keeps me a live umpire.

I just call Albie and explain and hope he can take it from there.

"Albie, all the facts point to one man as the killer. The real mystery, more than the killing, is why Gus Adams, known for his laziness and lack of hustle, took off after that ball like Willy Mays in his prime. Consider the possibilities: did he have some special grudge against the hitter, some reason to want to rob Jack Forrest of a home run? It's possible, but I can't think of any and besides, it's just a spring-training game. So maybe there's somebody in the crowd he wants to impress—a lady maybe, Gus being a bachelor? But if so, he'd hardly have failed to run out that ground ball in the first inning.

"But what if there's *money* involved, Albie. *Suppose Adams made a bet*—say, on whether or not the opposition would hit a home run into the New York bullpen in the game that day. Suppose Gus bet they wouldn't, and suppose the poor sucker he was betting with had offered him big odds. That would be quite an incentive, wouldn't it?

"And suppose the one he made the bet with was one of the four guys in the bullpen, one who studied the hitters and knew that Jack Forrest was a pull hitter with power that might just hit one to that corner of the outfield, and who could have the knife ready for the possibility that Gus in his newfound gusto might just come tumbling over that little fence."

"He couldn't *know* that," Albie says.

"No, but he could know it was *possible* and be ready for it just in case. If it didn't happen he could wait a little longer to get Adams—my theory is he's been waiting years for his opportunity.

"What got me was this, Albie: this player who'd always studied the game and kept a book on the hitters suddenly shows up with a knife and suggests a game of mumblypeg in the bullpen. It's completely out of character!

"Albie, the name of the player Gus Adams killed with that line drive was Mossman. But his mother had remarried and her *previous* name was Salmonberry! The player who died in Higby Springs was Fred Salmonberry's younger half brother.

"What he said was right, Albie. Nobody could hate Gus Adams bad enough to kill him just over a baseball game."

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Ned Wadleigh, ace police reporter, is offered a scoop

APRIL STORY

by MIRIAM ALLEN de FORD

This all happened a long time ago, when there were as many as seven daily newspapers in a big city, all bitter rivals and avid to scoop one another. Nowadays, what with mergers and joint union contracts and so on, nothing like this could happen. Or could it?

Anyway, Ned Wadleigh was having a drink in Joe's Bar, a newspapermen's hangout, when this little nondescript man sidled up to him and said, "Aren't you Wadleigh, on the *Evening Star?*" Wadleigh nodded modestly; he would have nodded just as modestly if the stranger had asked him if he wasn't the *Star's* ace police reporter, because that's what he was.

"The one that got the Stephen K. Gunhoffer confession?" the little man went on. Wadleigh nodded again. "Could we talk somewhere in private?"

They moved with their drinks to a rear booth, and the little man ordered refills. When they came he said, "How would you like an even bigger scoop than the Gunhoffer confession?"

"How much bigger?"

"Well, Gunhoffer axed his wife, his mother-in-law, and his wife's sister. The man I'm thinking about—I'm talking for somebody else, you understand—"

"Of course."

"He'll sell the facts—m.o., motive, and everything else—on *five* unsolved murders."

"There aren't five connected unsolved murders around right now."

"How do you know? There are at least five unsolved, aren't there? Maybe all they need is proof of connection. And I—and this guy can give you that proof. He'll give you the exclusive story and the *Star* can have the credit for turning him in to the police."

Wadleigh shook his head.

"Accessory after the fact, if we heard the story and held it long enough to keep it on ice till we had time to print it. Gunhoffer had already been

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convicted; all he gave us was the inside dope on how and why, that they were never able to get out of him during the trial. Matter of fact, his lawyer engineered the deal, as the only way he could get his fee paid."

"My guy hasn't got a lawyer. It would be strictly between you and him."

"If he's got away with it so far, why does he want to spill it and give himself up now?"

"Look, it's his conscience eating him. He has a very tender conscience, believe it or not. It's a spectacular story, his reason for what he did. Might blow the top off of City Hall, incidentally, when it all comes out—big names involved, really big. And the *Star's* down on this administration. And he doesn't want a jury trial—he'll plead guilty."

"If he's got such a tender conscience, why doesn't he just take it to the nearest police station?"

"He's not a nut. He's got a wife and kids, and he wants to make sure they'll have enough to start life over again after dad's been topped or salted away for life. The cops aren't going to pay him, are they? So the *Star* gets a chance to break the case."

Ned Wadleigh leaned back in his chair and did some thinking.

"Okay," Wadleigh said, raising his glass in salute. "Say we went along with this, and then the whole thing blew up in our face? Why should we pay good money for a crazy story some kook dreamed up?"

The little man looked offended.

"He's not a kook," he said curtly. "And as long as he has a valid guarantee of payment, to go to his family, the money doesn't have to be handed over unless and until the case has been proved to the hilt and he's been convicted."

"And if it isn't and he isn't, then the paper's left with a big hullabaloo about something that was put over on us. We'd be the laughing-stock of every other sheet in town."

"Not necessarily," said the little man smoothly. "What's the date today?"

"March twenty-fourth. Why?"

"Okay. We agree on terms—I'm authorized to act as his agent, naturally. He comes in—say, two or three days from now. I'm the only one knows who he is, or where he is, and it might take a day or so for him to get in touch with you after I've given the green light. He'll come to meet you wherever you say. If he doesn't, what are you out? Nothing but a bit of kidding from your boss.

"But I tell you he'll come.

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So you print the story on April first. Get it? Then if it did blow up—only it won't—all you'd have to do would be to publish an editorial: *April Fooled You, Didn't We?* . . . But first, before we go any further with this at all, I've got to know what you paid Gunhoffer."

"His lawyer."

"His lawyer, then. There's no reason why he should tell me, or why Gunhoffer should from Death Row. But you can."

"Why do you have to know?"

"Simply because that's my—that's his first condition. He holds himself a peg or two above a berserk farmer like Stephen K. Gunhoffer. What my man did he considers an act of principle. He's offering a bigger story and he wants to know he's going to get more for it."

"That's not my department," Wadleigh objected. "All I did was interview Gunhoffer and put his story in shape. I had nothing to do with paying him. That's strictly the publisher's concern, or the editor-in-chief's."

"Rats. Of course you know how much it was. Give."

"Besides, there's another point. Maybe when he finds out what Gunhoffer got, even a chunk more than that wouldn't strike him as worth his while. How does he know the *Star* didn't get Gunhoffer cheap? Maybe the lawyer was willing to take a handful of peanuts rather than not get anything at all."

"So if my man isn't satisfied when he finds out what you paid Gunhoffer he'll feel free to peddle his goods somewhere else. You don't know his name or even which murders he committed. He kind of fancied having his story told with a Ned Wadleigh byline, but he's a businessman, too, and he's not out to lose money. If he doesn't like what I report to him, he'll have me take the deal to another paper—say, to the *Intelligencer.*"

The *Daily Intelligencer* was the *Evening Star's* chief rival. They were bitter enemies. There had been semi-riots between their distribution trucks and snide editorials on both sides just skirting the edge of libel; they cut each other's throat every chance they got.

The little man stopped talking and pulled out a pipe and a tobacco pouch and busied himself with filling and tamping and lighting. Wadleigh felt his collar tighten at the mere mention of that rag, the *Intelligencer.*

"I'd have to talk things over higher up," Wadleigh said cannily. "Tell me where to

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reach you and I'll let you know—say, tomorrow."

The stranger shook his head.

"Uh-uh. I decided—I promised my man I'd phone him a definite deal"—he glanced at his watch—"by two thirty this afternoon. You can wait here while I go to the booth. If he's satisfied, I'll make an appointment for him with you. If he isn't it's still early enough for me to go to the *Intelligencer* today and make my pitch to them instead. So tell me now. What did you pay Gunhoffer?"

"Well," Wadleigh stalled, "give me an idea first how much more you'd want than what we paid Gunhoffer."

"Just exactly double," said the little man firmly.

Ned Wadleigh was outraged.

"Why, you greedy—" he exploded. "If you think we're going to pay you $10,000—"

He stopped abruptly.

The stranger drained his glass and stood up. For the first time he smiled.

"That's why they sent me down," he said conversationally. "You didn't know me by sight. I just blew into town two weeks ago and got a job on the *Intelligencer*. You see, we've got the Purple Carnation Killer's girl friend holed up in our office right now. Big brassy fake blonde, name of Maisie. She's got a hell of a good story she'll sell us—*I Lived With the Purple Carnation*. She was the one who brought up the Gunhoffer case. Seems it's a matter of status, just like I told you—pro against amateur. She thinks she's more important than he is, and she refuses to sing till we tell her what the *Star* paid Gunhoffer, so we'd offer her more.

"That's what gave us this idea, and they sent me down to worm it out of you. As far as I know, there *aren't* five connected unsolved murders anywhere in the world.

"Well, thanks. $5,000, eh? I'll trot right back and tell them. Watch our front page on Wednesday, Wadleigh."

The little nondescript man laughed, picked up his hat, and walked out.

Ned Wadleigh stared after the departing figure, too choked with anger to speak.

Then suddenly he too started to laugh.

Instinctively he had exaggerated. So now the *Intelligencer* would pony up five grand for that slush of the Purple Carnation's girl friend that the *Star* wouldn't have touched on a bet—except maybe free.

And of course all they'd actually paid Gunhoffer's shyster lawyer was a lousy $1,000.

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a *NEW* Dover *NOVELET*

by JOYCE PORTER

It has been said that S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance was so popular in his heyday because readers loved to hate him. Perhaps Joyce Porter's Chief Inspector Wilfred Dover belongs, in his own way, to that unusual 'tec tradition. Here is the newest novelet about the ungainly, unwanted, uncomfortable man from Scotland Yard, and you'll find the unappetizing Dover up to his old tricks. The Abominable Showman still snarls, scowls, growls, glares, snaps, scoffs, barks, yelps, grumbles, grouses, roars, and bellows; he still is the abusive, irascible, boorish, rude, crude, bumbling bloodhound who manages—in his own way—to get the job done, and ultimately with credit to his noble calling . . .

DOVER AND THE DARK LADY

by JOYCE PORTER

"Strewth!" puffed Chief Inspector Wilfred Dover, grinding to an exhausted halt on the half landing. "You'd think they'd put a ruddy lift in, wouldn't you?"

Detective Sergeant MacGregor, although by no means incapacitated by the ascent of one short flight of stairs, paused and watched with well-concealed exasperation as his lord and master propped himself up against the handrail. Fat old pig!

"Besides," said Dover, who would have made the Garden of Eden ring with his complaints if he had chanced to be there before the Fall, "having to look at dead bodies before breakfast turns my stomach."

Somewhere in the distance a church clock wheezily struck ten.

"Or after!" snarled Dover furiously.

Sergeant MacGregor managed to force an encouraging smile. "It's only up these next

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few steps, sir," he said, and got a malevolent scowl for his pains.

Higher up, outside the closed door of Flat 2, a young policeman impassively observed the sluggish progress of his betters. Although he had never seen him before, he recognized Dover without the least hesitation. That ungainly bulk, clothed in its shabby overcoat and topped by a ridiculous bowler hat, could belong only to Scotland Yard's most unwanted detective. The young constable, not believing for a moment that the old devil could be as awful as police gossip painted him, nevertheless braced himself.

"You waiting for a bus, laddie?"

The snarl with which these words were uttered was so unnecessarily vicious that it took the wind out of the young policeman's sails. "No, sir," he gulped and was mortified to find himself turning pink. The hand which he had been about to snap up to the brim of his helmet now dangled uselessly in midair. With an effort he pulled it down and flung the door open.

Dover shouldered his way past. "Fool!" he growled.

Inside the flat the scene of intense professional activity which met Dover's eyes was not calculated to ruffle his ill humor. Work in any shape or form was anathema to him and the sight of all those solemn-faced men measuring, photographing, and puffing out little squirts of fingerprint powder was enough to upset him for the rest of the day.

A uniformed Inspector came hurrying across from the far side of the large sitting room. He was bustlingly full of his own importance and stepped nimbly over the sheet-covered corpse which lay in the middle of the carpet.

The formalities were soon dispensed with. They usually were with Dover who was already looking around for somewhere to take the load off his feet.

The Inspector, cut short before he'd got more than a couple of words out, suggested the bedroom and the two of them, trailed by MacGregor, picked their way across the sitting room.

"Ooh, that's more like it," sighed Dover, sinking gratefully onto the bed. "My feet are crippling me!" He didn't let his relief get the better of him, though. He glared up at the somewhat disconcerted Inspector. "Well, come on, spit it out, man! I haven't got all day to waste sitting around here, if you have."

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"Er—no, sir."

Dover blew impatiently down his nose. "Who's the stiff?"

The Inspector shot a bewildered glance at MacGregor but he got no help there. "George Andrew Willoughby, sir." The Inspector stopped as he became aware that Dover was concentrating most of his attention on unlacing his boots. Dover looked up.

The Inspector gave a nervous smile and continued, "Age, forty-three. Divorced. Living here alone. Death was the result of a gunshot wound in the left temple, fired at close quarters. We found a German Luger on the floor beside the body, and it would appear that was the weapon used."

Dover abandoned his bootlaces and looked up with a smile actually wreathing his pasty face. "Suicide," he announced with every appearance of satisfaction.

The Inspector failed to hide his dismay. "Oh, I think that's a little premature, sir."

"Who's interested in what you think?"

"There are one or two points which—"

"Somebody else's fingerprints on the gun?"

"There are no fingerprints on the gun, sir."

"So, there you are!" trumpeted Dover. "Suicide!"

The Inspector was one of those men who never know when they're beaten. Against all odds he still thought that reason, common sense, and cold hard logic would prevail. "The gun had been wiped clean, sir. It didn't even have Mr. Willoughby's fingerprints on it. And then there's the woman's handkerchief we found under the body and the fact that the front door was—"

"Here, hold on!" Dover's face had already slipped back into its habitual sullen expression. "One ruddy thing at a time! What's this about a handkerchief?"

The Inspector was gratified by such a display of interest. "It's in the next room, sir. I'll get it, shall I?"

Dover didn't bother to wait until the Inspector had closed the door behind him. He sneered, then swung round to vent his spite on his sergeant. "What's the matter with you?" he inquired. "Lost the use of your legs or something?"

MacGregor had turned the other cheek so often it's a wonder his head hadn't come unscrewed. "No, sir," he said meekly.

"Well, get out there and start having a look round, you blockhead! If we're not careful we'll have that oaf solving the

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case under our blooming nose."

"Yes, sir."

The paths of MacGregor and the uniformed Inspector crossed in the bedroom doorway. Each carefully avoided catching the other's eye.

The handkerchief which had been found under the dead man's body had been sealed in a transparent envelope. Dover examined it sourly. "It's got some initials on it," he said, making the statement sound like an accusation.

"Yes, sir. T.H., we think, but of course with these fancy monograms you can't always be sure."

Dover dropped the handkerchief negligently onto the bed. "Girl friend?"

"Well, that's just the point, sir." The Inspector took a couple of steps forward in his eagerness. "There is definitely a woman connected with the case. The spare bedroom, sir, is—"

One of Dover's hobbies was to cut people down to size. He now choked the Inspector off without a qualm. "Which side of the head did you say he shot himself in?"

"The left, sir." The Inspector raised his left hand and pointed the fingers like a gun at his temple.

Dover regarded him morosely. "Left-handed, was he?"

The Inspector almost wept with relief. He'd begun to think Dover was congenitally incapable of putting two and two together. "Not as far as we can ascertain, sir. The way his possessions are arranged on his desk and in the bathroom would seem to indicate—"

"How long since he snuffed it?"

A lesser man would have lost heart and even the Inspector was beginning to feel mauled. At the very minimum he felt he had the right to be treated with common courtesy. After all, this crime, whatever it was, was none of his business. He'd simply come along with the advance party just to keep an eye on things until—God help us!—the experts arrived on the scene.

The uniformed Inspector wasn't a detective and, if the specimen lolling in front of him like a hippopotamus in a mud hole was an example, he was damned glad he wasn't. He'd done his best to be helpful because he knew that speed was extremely important in the early stages; but if his assistance wasn't going to be appreciated—

"Cat got your tongue?"

The Inspector gritted his teeth. "The police surgeon thinks he's been dead about twelve hours, sir. Say some-

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where between nine o'clock last night and one this morning. He may be able to narrow it down when he's done the post-mortem. Would you like to have a word with him, sir?"

"Not bleeding likely," said Dover. He plumped up his pillows and yawned an enormous yawn. "And you can push off, too."

"You don't require me any longer, sir?"

"Never," observed Dover as he let his eyelids droop over his piggy eyes, "wanted you in the first place."

But there is no rest for the wicked. Less than ten minutes after the Inspector had departed, Sergeant MacGregor came bursting in, bubbling over with an enthusiasm that made Dover's bones ache.

MacGregor tactfully ignored the fact that his noisy entrance had awakened Dover from a refreshing doze. "Sir, I really think we have a case of murder here!"

"Is that so?" said Dover bleakly. Trust MacGregor to put a blight on things.

"It's the way he was shot, sir. If he'd done it himself, he'd have had to use his left hand and—"

"Queen Anne's dead!" growled Dover unpleasantly.

"Eh? Oh, I see, sir." MacGregor counted slowly up to ten under his breath and tried again. After all, a crime had been committed and somebody had to cajole Dover into trying to solve it. "I think, sir, that there may be a woman involved."

Dover screwed his face up in disgust.

"And it's not only that lady's handkerchief, sir. Have you heard about the other bedroom?"

"What about it?" asked Dover cautiously.

"It's a woman's room, sir. Full of frocks and dresses and there's make-up and ladies' shoes and frou-frou and everything. The late Mr. Willoughby must have had a steady girl friend."

Dover scowled. "Who found the body?"

"Oh, that was Willoughby's ex-wife, sir. Apparently she called round this morning and—"

"Where is she?"

MacGregor was more than a little surprised at this sudden display of interest but he was anxious to encourage any spark of initiative Dover might show. "She's in the flat opposite, sir. They thought it'd be better for her to wait in there until you were ready to see her. She's pretty upset, I gather."

"Gerumph!" said Dover.

MacGregor tried to translate

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this into some expression of human desire. "Shall I fetch her in here, sir?"

Dover, however, wasn't as big a fool as he looked and, where his own comfort was concerned, he could weigh the pros and cons with amazing speed. He was not the one to go to the mountain if there was the faintest hope that the mountain could be brought to him; but he was also an astute student of human nature. Here was a shocked and distressed woman being looked after by kindly neighbors. The least the neighbors could do was offer the poor soul something in the way of light refreshment.

With a grunt Dover heaved himself to his feet and settled his bowler hat firmly on his head. "No, we'll go and see her, laddie."

Mrs. Thelma Lucian had, indeed, been extremely shaken by the gruesome discovery of her former husband's body and nobody raised any objection when Dover suggested that further supplies of cakes and coffee would be a great comfort. As soon as they arrived Dover began tucking in happily while MacGregor led Mrs. Lucian carefully through her story.

"Now, madam, you say you arrived at Mr. Willoughby's flat at about nine o'clock this morning. Were you calling by appointment or was it just a casual visit?"

"Well, both, really," said Mrs. Lucian, twisting a sodden handkerchief nervously in her fingers. "You see, Will—that's what everybody calls him—Will rang me up last night and said he wanted to see me right away. Well, I was absolutely dumfounded, you see, because I don't think I've seen him more than twice since we were divorced ten years ago. I'm surprised he even knew where to find me."

"What time was this?" asked MacGregor.

"Oh, about ten o'clock last night, I think." Mrs. Lucian passed a hand wearily across her forehead. "It was quite late."

"Why did he want to see you?"

"Well, he didn't say. I asked him, of course, but he just said it was terribly important and I simply must come over and see him right away."

"So you did?"

Mrs. Lucian was a pretty woman in her middle thirties with large dark eyes. She opened them wide now. "No, I didn't. I kept trying to tell Will that I didn't think I could but he just wouldn't listen. I mean, it was such a surprise, you see, after all these years. And, then, I was in the house by

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myself—my present husband's abroad at the moment—and frankly I simply didn't feel like turning out in the middle of the night and trailing halfway across London on my own just because Will had taken it into his head to snap his fingers."

MacGregor nodded his head sympathetically. "Did Mr. Willoughby seem distressed when he phoned you?"

"You mean, did he sound as though he was going to commit suicide?" Mrs. Lucian was not unintelligent. "No, I wouldn't say so. He was certainly extremely worked up about something, but he sounded—well—angry more than anything else. I couldn't make him out at all, really."

Out of the corner of his eye MacGregor saw Dover reaching for another slice of fruit cake. "And this morning?"

Mrs. Lucian sighed. "Well, in the bright harsh light of day I began to feel a bit guilty. I mean—" She shrugged delicately. "Anyhow, I decided to come round. I rang the bell several times but there was no answer. Then I knocked."

"Yes?"

"My knocking pushed the door open. It wasn't locked. I called Will's name but there was no reply, of course, so I went in and found him lying there on the floor."

"Was the light on?" MacGregor put the question casually but that didn't make it unimportant. Even Dover stopped munching to listen to the answer.

"No."

Dover's nose twitched in annoyance. Even he knew that suicides virtually never killed themselves in the dark. He took another large bite of the fruit cake. Just his blooming luck!

MacGregor went smoothly on with his questions. "Did you touch him?"

"No. I knew he was dead." Mrs. Lucian shuddered. "His eyes were open. Then I saw the gun on the floor beside him and I realized he must have shot himself. It was horrible. I felt I was to blame though I couldn't really see why." She struggled to control her feelings. "I picked the phone up and dialed 999 and then I waited outside on the landing until the police came."

"Do you know if your ex-husband owned a gun?"

"Yes, he did. A German one he brought back from the war. I think he had some ammunition, too. I tried to persuade him to get rid of it, but he never would."

"I see." MacGregor leaned back. "Well, I think that will do for the moment, madam, unless you have anything else you

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want to tell us." MacGregor remembered his manners just in time and turned to Dover. "Have you any further questions, sir?"

Dover pointedly ignored his sergeant and addressed himself to Mrs. Lucian. "What's your first name?"

"Thelma."

Dover inserted a podgy and none-too-clean finger into his mouth and dislodged a currant which had got stuck behind his upper denture. "And your maiden name?"

"Hamilton."

Dover examined the excavated currant dubiously before shoving it back in his mouth and consuming it. He searched round in his pockets, apparently without success. "Where's that damn handkerchief?"

"Here you are, sir."

Dover snatched the envelope from MacGregor's hands and tossed it across to Mrs. Lucian. "That yours?"

Mrs. Lucian examined the handkerchief unhappily. "I'm not sure. I don't think—"

"Got your initials on it!" barked Dover, signaling to MacGregor that he was ready for another cup of coffee.

"Well, yes—my initials before I was married," admitted Mrs. Lucian, "but I haven't used my maiden name for over ten years. I may have had some embroidered like this but it's all so long ago—"

"How do you explain your handkerchief being found under your husband's corpse?" demanded Dover.

Mrs. Lucian began to get flustered. "Well, I can't. I certainly didn't put it there. Maybe Will still had it."

"Kept it as a memento of you?" sneered Dover, who enjoyed bullying defenseless women. "Very romantic! What happened? You leave him for somebody with a bit more money?"

"No, I didn't," retorted Mrs. Lucian angrily. "Not that it's any business of yours, but my present husband happens to earn a good bit less than Will does—did. And I didn't meet him until several months after my first marriage was as dead as a dodo."

Luckily Dover didn't feel quite ready for a full-scale confrontation so early in the morning, so he sank back sulkily while MacGregor took over and calmed things down.

"Just a couple more questions, if you don't mind, Mrs. Lucian," he said, smiling fetchingly so that she'd realize that not all members of the Metropolitan Police were that disagreeable. "What did Mr. Willoughby do for a living?"

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"He was an income-tax consultant," said Mrs. Lucian, sparing time to flash a glance of pure hatred at Dover, "and a very successful one."

"Do you know if he had any business worries?"

"I'm afraid I don't. I told you, I haven't seen him for ages and I know practically nothing about his affairs. Judging by the way his flat was furnished, though, I wouldn't have thought he was short of money. In any case, Will just wasn't the type to get himself into financial difficulties."

MacGregor frowned. "He never married again?"

"No."

"Do you know if he had a girl friend?"

"I should imagine he's had several over the years," said Mrs. Lucian indifferently.

When MacGregor came back after having escorted Mrs. Lucian out, he found Dover staring moodily at the trayful of empty crockery which lay on the table.

"I've told Mrs. Lucian we'll send somebody round later to take a formal statement, sir."

If MacGregor had hoped to impress the Chief Inspector with his efficiency he was destined to be disappointed. Dover had weightier problems on his mind. "Got a cigarette, laddie?" he asked.

MacGregor was strongly tempted to say no, but he lost his nerve at the last moment. Resentfully he got his cigarette case out and passed it over.

"I reckon she did it," said Dover, who was a great believer in hedging his bets. "Ninety-nine times out of a hundred it's the wife. Or the ex-wife," he added as he saw MacGregor's mouth open. "You mark my words, she came round here last night and croaked him. Then she turned up this morning, all innocent-like, to discover the body and clean up any clues she may have left."

MacGregor had learned long ago not to be surprised at anything Dover did; but even he found this about face too mercurial to be let pass without comment. "I thought you were inclined to the suicide theory, sir."

Dover ignored that. "You'd better clear off and interview a few of the neighbors, hadn't you? Ask 'em if they spotted Mrs. What's-her-name sneaking up here last night."

"Well, as a matter of fact, sir, I've just been having a word with the old couple who live here. They're a pretty nosey pair and they seem to have kept their eyes open where Willoughby is concerned. I think they may know something about his lady friend."

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"Wheel 'em in," said Dover. "And then you shove off."

MacGregor's face fell. "Don't you think it would be better, sir, if I stayed and took—?"

"No," said Dover nastily, "I don't."

Mr. and Mrs. Grey were a retired couple who were extremely anxious that Dover shouldn't think they spent their entire time spying on their next-door neighbor.

"It's just," explained Mrs. Grey with a complacent smile, "that occasionally one can't help noticing things."

"Noticing things," echoed Mr. Grey with an approving nod.

Dover recognized the signs and bestirred himself to get a question in before he was overwhelmed by a flood. "Did you hear a shot last night?"

For some reason, known only to the Greys, this was classified as man's talk and Mr. Grey spoke up boldly. "Not with these walls," he said, proudly slapping the nearest one. "None of your prefabricated jerry-building here! This is solid, good old-fashioned workmanship, this is. You'd not hear a bomb going off in the next room, never mind a pistol."

"Besides," put in Mrs. Grey, we had the television on."

Dover slumped back in his chair and rested his head wearily on one hand. "All right," he rumbled, "what do you know?"

"That woman was there last night," said Mrs. Grey, her mouth settling into a disapproving line. " 'The dark lady,' my hubbie calls her, though in my opinion she's far from being what I call a lady and she changes the color of her hair more often than he changes his socks. Blonde one day, brown the next, and a redhead the week after. All wigs, of course. You can always tell."

"I thought it was different women at first," chuckled Mr. Grey.

His wife jerked her head emphatically. "I didn't! It takes more than a change of hair to fool me. I should have liked to have told Mr. Willoughby that, just to let him know, but of course I didn't. Well, it was none of our business, really, was it? Actually, she was quite unmistakable once you got used to her. Tall and a bit on the broad-shouldered side. Like Joan Crawford. Big feet, too. Like Greta Garbo. Of course, what her face was like, that I can't tell you because she always took very good care never to let me get a proper look at her. Very furtive, she was."

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"Very furtive," agreed Mr. Grey.

"You never," Mrs. Grey continued with hardly a pause for breath, "so much as laid eyes on her until it had gone dark. Never. She used to come creeping in and out like a thief in the night, turning her head away as soon as she saw you and only nodding when you said good evening. And those stairs outside are terribly badly lit, you know. My husband has written several times to the landlord about them."

"Several times," confirmed Mr. Grey.

Dover was getting impatient. "What about last night?"

"I was just coming to that," said Mrs. Grey. "It was when I was putting the milk bottles out. That'd be about ten o'clock, wouldn't it, dear?"

"About ten o'clock," said Mr. Grey.

"She used to come and go at all sorts of different times," Mrs. Grey went on, "but her little subterfuges didn't deceive us. Oh, dear me, no! We were just a bit too clever for her, weren't we, my love?" Mrs. Grey received her husband's affirmative nod and turned back to Dover. "We could hear her coming along the pavement past our window, you see. She didn't know that. Her step"—Mrs. Grey smiled smugly to herself—"was quite unmistakable."

"Quite unmistakable."

Reluctantly Dover made an effort to get the facts clear. "So last night you saw this woman going into Mr. What's-his-name's flat at ten o'clock?"

"That's right," agreed Mrs. Grey.

"Right," said her husband.

"See her leaving?"

Mrs. Grey was sorry but, no, she hadn't.

Mr. Grey was sorry, too.

"Any idea who she is? Her name? Where she comes from?"

Alas, the woman's identity remained a complete mystery—though not, Mrs. Grey managed to imply, through any want of their trying. "Her clothes were very good," she added, anxious to be helpful. "She was always dressed in the height of fashion. I dread to think how much she spent on them. She was wearing a lovely black and white check coat last night and a red silk head scarf."

"Is that so?" said Dover. "Well, you can give my sergeant a full description." He postponed getting to his feet a bit longer though, God knows, he'd had more than enough of Mrs. Grey. "This ex-wife woman you had in here?"

"Mrs. Lucian?"

"Could she be What's-his-name's nocturnal visitor?"

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And it was with Mrs. Grey's tinkling laugh at the sheer absurdity of such an idea jarring in his ears that Dover finally retreated in search of a bit of peace and quiet. He loathed these first few hours of a criminal investigation with everybody rushing around like scalded cats and no place a chap could sit and think and call his soul his own. However, from long experience Dover knew that, once the initial hullabaloo was over, the quietest place was frequently in the eye of the storm.

He lumbered up to the young constable still on guard outside Mr. Willoughby's flat. "Anybody still in there?"

"I'm afraid they've all gone, sir."

"Good," said Dover. "Well, I'll be able to pursue my own investigations now." He fixed the constable with an eagle eye. "And I don't want to be disturbed by anybody at all for the next hour. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You'd better. Oh, and I shall want some lunch laid on, so start organizing it. A couple of bottles of beer, a pie or two, some sandwiches, and a few cakes. Nothing elaborate."

The young policeman nodded, saucer-eyed.

Once inside the flat Dover proceeded to subject each and every room to the most meticulous search. Sergeant MacGregor would have been dumfounded if he had witnessed such thoroughness and such reckless expenditure of energy. It was, however, all to no avail. Dover couldn't find a single cigarette in the place.

He was not in the sunniest of moods when he flung the front door open again.

The young policeman jumped halfway out of his skin.

"Got any cigarettes on you, laddie?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't smoke."

"That's no bloody excuse!" snarled Dover. "You could carry some for other people, couldn't you?" He underlined his extreme displeasure by slamming the door as hard as he could.

That left only food. Dover waddled back to the kitchen and glumly surveyed the shelves. Corn flakes. Tins of sardines. Baked beans. Eggs. A couple of lamb chops on a plate in the fridge. 'Strewth, was the fellow on a blooming diet or something? In the end Dover grabbed a bottle of pickled onions and took it back with him to the sitting room where he collapsed onto the settee and thankfully put his feet up.

The dead body had already been removed to the mortuary

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but Dover wouldn't have minded if it had still been lying there on the floor beside him. He helped himself to a pickled onion and gazed idly round the room. Blimey, What's-his-name did himself jolly well! Leather armchairs, sporting prints and antique dueling pistols plastered all over the walls, color television . . .

Sergeant MacGregor, being only human, wasn't in any hurry to get back and report his progress. Grateful to be let off the leash even for a short while, he concentrated on doing an unspectacular but conscientious job. He interviewed all the other occupants of the block of flats and refused to become disheartened when his efforts went unrewarded. One could hardly expect everybody to be as genteelly inquisitive as the Greys.

Indeed, Mrs. Grey was lurking discreetly on the landing when MacGregor came down the stairs and he was obliged to go back into her flat and take her statement. Then, armed with a detailed description of the unknown woman, he commandeered the Greys' phone and began to organize his reinforcements.

Whether the late Mr. Willoughby's girl friend lived within walking distance of his flat or farther afield, inquiries could be made. From local residents and from taxi drivers. Although there was an underground station nearby and a bus route only three minutes' walk away, MacGregor thought that the taxi drivers would be the best bet to start with. According to Mrs. Grey's evidence, the woman sometimes visited Willoughby long after the buses and tubes had stopped.

In fact, MacGregor was rather intrigued by the hours the woman kept and he wondered if she was unmarried. Married women usually confine their extramarital activities to the hours when their husbands are safely away at work. Was this woman married to a man on the night shift or had she, perhaps, a job of her own? Willoughby himself, of course, wouldn't be free until the evenings but his girl friend did seem to keep some very late hours, though Mrs. Grey claimed to have seen her leaving the flat as early as eight o'clock on a couple of occasions.

Still, the extensive inquiries necessary to track the woman down were best left to the local police division. So, after he had set them in motion, MacGregor went off to find Dover.

MacGregor and lunch arrived on the scene of the crime at exactly the same moment. Dover opened one disconsolate

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eye and belched as MacGregor set the tray down. It is no part of a Detective Sergeant's duties to play nursemaid to his superior officer but MacGregor was a kindly man and didn't think it fair to expose the young policeman to the trauma of seeing Dover at feeding time.

Dover dragged himself into a sitting position and belched again. "Damn pickled onions!" he grumbled, gesturing with a flabby hand at the bottle which was now three-quarters empty. "They play hell with your guts."

MacGregor immediately became busy opening Dover's beer and placing the pile of sandwiches near to hand. Diversionary tactics were essential because, if Dover got started on the vagaries of his stomach, there was little hope of ever stopping him.

"Find out anything?" demanded Dover suspiciously as he came up for air with a foam mustache superimposed on his own.

"Not really, sir." Out of habit MacGregor pulled out his notebook and began turning over the pages. "One or two of the other residents have seen Mrs. Grey's 'dark lady' but they don't know anything more about her. The descriptions are, as usual, inconclusive." He read from his notebook. " 'Above average height and well built.' I'm having the usual house-to-house inquiries made in the neighborhood, sir, and we're questioning taxi drivers. Of course"—he removed Dover's dirty plate and substituted another on which squatted a greasy-looking pork pie—"she may turn up of her own accord when she finds out what's happened."

"And pigs might fly!" scoffed Dover, catching a dribble of jelly before it dropped off his chin onto his overcoat. "She's the one we're after, you know."

MacGregor noted with resignation that yet another unhatched chick was being counted. "Yes, sir."

"Stands out a mile," insisted Dover as he sensed that his previous statement hadn't exactly bowled MacGregor over. "Lovers' tiff. What's-his-name gets fed up and gives her her marching orders. She cuts up rough—you know what women are like—accuses him of tossing her aside like an old glove and shoots him. Bang!"

MacGregor chewed his bottom lip. "With his gun, sir?"

"Why not? She's been shacking up with him for years, hasn't she? She'd know about the gun and where he kept it. Then all she has to do is wipe the fingerprints off, let herself

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out quietly, and disappear into the night. Nobody knows who she is or where she lives or anything."

"Oh, steady on, sir!" MacGregor tried to soften the implied criticism of Dover's methods by offering the plate of cakes. "We've hardly started our investigations yet. There may be dozens of people who know all about her and her association with Willoughby."

"Such as?"

"Well, his friends and business colleagues, for example. Or relatives. Just because a total stranger like Mrs. Grey doesn't know everything, it doesn't mean—"

"Bet you!" said Dover sulkily. His temper was not being improved by the piece of seed cake he had just gobbled down. He seemed to have been digging those blasted bits out of his dentures for days!

"In any case, sir," MacGregor continued, "if she'd really intended to make a run for it, she'd hardly have left a roomful of clues behind her, would she? If we get no joy anywhere else, we'll probably be able to trace her through all those clothes and things."

Dover scowled and brushed ineffectively at the crumbs and beer he had spilt down his lapels. "She could hardly take 'em with her, could she?" he objected. " 'Strewth, she'd need a bloomin' truck to move that lot! Besides, I don't reckon there was anything premeditated about this crime. She just saw red and let him have it. No time for elaborate plans." He gazed sullenly at the beer MacGregor was pouring out for him. "Is that the last of it?"

"I'm afraid so, sir." MacGregor, ever hopeful, pushed the bill for one pound and sixpence into what he trusted was Dover's line of vision. Dover looked clean through it. MacGregor sighed. "Would you like a cigarette, sir?"

Dover's mean little eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"I just thought that while you were letting your lunch settle, I might go and have another look round that spare bedroom."

Dover was too old a hand to be caught like that. Give this young pup an inch and he'd be clapping the handcuffs on the murderer before you had time to catch your breath! With a nimbleness that only pure bloody-mindedness could inspire, the Chief Inspector jumped up off his settee. "I'll come with you," he announced and had the exquisite satisfaction of seeing an expression of acute chagrin pass over MacGregor's face. He didn't hesitate to rub the salt in. "Just in case

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you miss something, laddie."

In the spare bedroom Dover, with his cigarette, established his command post on the bed and directed operations from there. MacGregor started with the wardrobe and began carefully and methodically to remove all the dresses and coats from their hangers. The frocks were pretty and very feminine but not one of them contained a marker's label. There were three coats, one of fur. MacGregor went through the pockets before returning them to the hangers. He turned to Dover and shook his head.

"No labels anywhere, sir. They've all been removed."

Dover was not disheartened. "Try the shoes."

But the shoes, apart from the fact that they confirmed the rather large size of their owner's feet, gave no indication of their provenance, either.

"I suppose," said MacGregor doubtfully, "that we could get some experts in. They might be able to identify the manufacturers. Of course, if she just bought them over the counter in a chain store somewhere and paid cash—" He sighed and turned his attentions to the dressing table and the highboy. Handbags—all empty. Stockings, frilly nylon underwear, gloves, handkerchiefs, negligees.

"No laundry marks?" asked Dover, reclining like a sated pasha on his divan.

MacGregor dropped a pair of shocking-pink panties back in the drawer. "These are the sort of things a woman would wash by hand, sir."

"Well," said Dover, "faint heart never won fair lady. Get cracking!"

MacGregor slowly completed his search of the room, looking under the furniture and behind the pictures. He even got a bit of his own back when he obliged Dover to transfer to a chair while he stripped the bed.

"Oh, dear," said MacGregor as he pulled the pink satin bedcover back into place. "You'd think there'd be something that'd give us a lead, wouldn't you, sir? Even those wigs are ready-made ones, bought off the peg."

Dover grunted, most of his attention being engaged in climbing back onto the bed. "That gabbling old cow in the other flat—didn't she mention what the woman was wearing last night?"

Nothing was guaranteed to spur MacGregor on to greater efforts than the lively fear that, by some miracle, Dover had spotted something he'd missed. "I believe she did, sir," he agreed, searching his excellent memory at top speed. He had Mrs. Grey's statement in his

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notebook but he didn't want to admit even a partial defeat by referring to it. "Yes, she said that the woman was wearing a black and white check coat and a red silk head scarf." MacGregor hesitated and then leaped for the wardrobe. "Oh, of course, sir. You think this coat—?" He pulled the black and white coat off its hanger. "And"—he rushed over to the highboy—"this head scarf—?"

"It's a possibility."

MacGregor creased his forehead into a worried frown. "She changed her clothes before she left?"

"Must have. She'd have never left without a coat at this time of year."

"But—why?"

"Search me." Dover was making it plain that he had no intention of doing all the work but he did proffer one suggestion. "Maybe it started raining and she put a mac on."

MacGregor shook his head. "No, it didn't rain last night, sir." He examined the coat again. "Perhaps she got blood on it . . . No—no blood."

"She wouldn't have left bloodstained clothing behind, you nitwit!" snapped Dover. "She was trying to make it look like suicide, wasn't she? A bloodstained coat left behind would soon have knocked that idea on the head."

MacGregor who, even after years of working with Dover, still had his pride, objected to being called a nitwit. "If she really was trying to make it look like suicide, she didn't do a very good job of it, did she? She shot him on the wrong side of the head and she wiped the fingerprints off the gun. And then what about that handkerchief she left under the body? That was obviously meant to direct our suspicions towards Mrs. Lucian. Well, you don't try to incriminate somebody else for murder if you're trying to fool the police into thinking it's suicide."

"Maybe she's a nut," said Dover drearily. His stomach was beginning to rumble in a most peculiar way. Could that pie have been spoiled?

"The handkerchief!" MacGregor slapped himself on the side of the head. "Just a minute, sir." He crossed over to the dressing table and pulled out the top drawer. There were a dozen handkerchiefs but he unfolded them all before turning to Dover with a grin of triumph. "Look at that, sir!"

Dover directed a jaundiced eye at the handkerchief being held out to him. It was similar to the one found under Willoughby's body and had the same two initials embroidered on it.

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MacGregor was like a dog with two tails. He waved the handkerchief in Dover's face. "These initials belong to the unknown woman, sir. It's just a coincidence that they happen to fit Mrs. Lucian's maiden name as well."

As soon as Dover perceived that his sergeant was coming round, more or less, to his point of view, he changed it. "I still haven't crossed that ex-wife off my list," he said stubbornly and relished MacGregor's wince. "Her story's got more holes in it than a pauper's winding sheet."

MacGregor turned away and began to fold up the handkerchiefs. It gave him something to do with his hands and probably saved Dover from getting the punch in the nose he so richly deserved. He didn't resume the discussion until he was sure he'd got his voice under control. "Really, sir?"

"Yes, really, sir!" Dover as usual made a hash of mimicking his sergeant's accent. "What about that cock-and-bull story she spun us about a mysterious telephone call and him begging her to come round and hold his hand after ten years?"

"I don't think that is incompatible with a tentative suspicion of the missing girl friend, sir," objected MacGregor. "Perhaps Willoughby had been having trouble with the girl friend earlier and she threatened him. Willoughby got frightened and felt that he had to turn to somebody for help."

"And he turned to his ex-wife?" yelped Dover. "You're wasting your time in the police, laddie. You ought to be writing blooming fairy tales."

MacGregor was spared more samples of Dover's heavy-handed wit by the noise of scuffling and the sound of raised voices coming from the sitting room outside. He went across and opened the door to find the young policeman, helmet askew, grappling with a plump middle-aged man. "What," he demanded in a voice of thunder that might have come from Dover himself, "the hell is going on here?"

The combatants disentangled themselves and stood looking sheepishly at each other.

The young policeman adjusted his helmet. "This chap was trying to run away, Sergeant," he said breathlessly. "He came up the stairs and then, as soon as he caught sight of me, he turned on his heel and—"

"Nonsense!" interrupted the plump man indignantly. "I just changed my mind, that's all." He pulled his coat straight. "And I wish to register my

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objection to the brutal and entirely unwarranted man-handling I have just received."

Dover appeared in the doorway and the plump man forgot his complaints and goggled. MacGregor quickly took advantage of this hiatus to dismiss the young policeman and get everybody else sitting down calmly.

"Now, sir," he began sternly, "may I ask what you are doing here?"

The plump man was staring at the rough chalk outline in the middle of the carpet. He looked up. "I came to see Mr. Willoughby. Look, what's been happening here?"

MacGregor had the typical detective's habit of never answering questions. "Are you a friend of Mr. Willoughby's, sir?"

The plump man nodded. He was looking at the chalk outline again. "Is he dead?"

"Why should you think that, sir?"

The plump man gazed round helplessly. "Well, it's pretty obvious, isn't it? The constable on the door—and I suppose you are a policeman, too?"

"I am Sergeant MacGregor, sir, and this is Chief Inspector Dover."

"Oh," said the plump man, rather inadequately. "Er—how do you do?"

Dover had been showing signs of restlessness for some time and now he exploded. "'Strewth!" he spat—at MacGregor, of course. "Can you get a move on? We're supposed to be investigating a murder case, not holding a ruddy tea party!"

"*Murder?*" The plump man's mouth dropped open. "You don't mean Will's been *murdered?*"

Now that Dover had let, if not the cat, at least a fair-sized kitten out of the bag, MacGregor tried to remedy the situation. He got his notebook out and assumed his most official air. "Your name, sir?"

"Crump. Charles Anthony Crump."

"And what are you doing here, sir?"

"I told you," said Mr. Crump, still staring in awed fascination at Dover. "I came round to see Will."

On the settee Dover roused himself again. "At this time of day?" he demanded incredulously. "What made you think he'd be here?"

Mr. Crump cringed visibly and ran a pink tongue over his lips. "I rang his office and they said he hadn't come in this morning. I thought he might be unwell or something."

Dover had many shortcomings but his ability to spot a victim was unerring. He squint-

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ed at Mr. Crump like a somewhat overweight stoat sizing up a juicy rabbit. "Very considerate," he sneered.

Mr. Crump tried to fight back. "It's just that Will has been extremely upset and worried recently and I was afraid—well, I was afraid he might do something silly."

"You mean, commit suicide?" asked MacGregor, who always found Dover's antics acutely embarrassing.

Mr. Crump nodded. "I must admit the possibility crossed my mind. He had a gun, you know."

"Do you know what he was worried about, sir?"

"Oh"—Mr. Crump squirmed uneasily in his chair—"things, you know. Middle age. Life turning a shade sour in general."

"Women?" That was Dover sticking his oar in once more.

"Women?" Mr. Crump started nervously and again flushed to the tips of his ears. "Well, I—I don't know."

"You knew about his popsie though, didn't you?"

"His popsie?"

Mr. Crump's obvious distress was meat and drink to Dover and he gave the screw another twist by appealing mockingly to MacGregor. "Just like a little parrot, ain't he?"

"Now, look here"—Mr. Crump apparently thought he still had a few human rights left—"I must protest against being spoken to like that! I am perfectly willing to help in any way I can but I will not"—he made the mistake of catching Dover's eye—"be browbeaten," he concluded feebly.

"Then stop messing about and answer a simple question when you're asked," roared Dover. "What about What's-his-name's bit of fluff?"

"I know nothing about her," wailed Mr. Crump.

"How long have you known What's-his-name?"

Mr. Crump bit his lip to stop it trembling. "Eight or nine years, I suppose."

"Been to this flat before?"

"Of course I have."

"And you didn't know anything about that love nest in there?"

"No!" screamed Mr. Crump.

"Liar!" bellowed Dover.

"Oh, God!" Mr. Crump's voice broke into a sob and he buried his head in his hands.

Dover's pasty face split into a grin of pure delight. Exerting himself above and beyond the call of duty he got up off the settee and bore down on the unfortunate Mr. Crump, seizing him by two greedy handfuls of coat and yanking him to his feet. "You're hiding something, you miserable little runt," he

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howled, shaking Mr. Crump to and fro like a ragdoll. "Well, I'm going to find out what it is if I have to break every bone in your body!"

Still rattling Mr. Crump backward and forward, Dover turned to MacGregor. "This is the joker we've been looking for, laddie! We've got our murderer!"

MacGregor knew that he ought to say something, if only goodbye. It was not as if the sight of Dover beating a confession out of a perfectly innocent member of the public was any great novelty. MacGregor had witnessed it several times before and knew there was little he could do to induce Dover to substitute brains for brawn. Still, the effort had to be made, if only because one day the worm might turn and MacGregor would find himself involved in the ensuing scandal.

"Er—easy on, sir."

For a man who had just found his fourth solution to a crime in less than three hours, Dover proved remarkably amenable to the warning. Or, maybe, it was just that his arms were getting tired. In any case he slung an exhausted and terrified Mr. Crump back into his chair. Mr. Crump's ordeal, however, was by no means over.

Very deliberately Dover rested his hands on the arms of Mr. Crump's chair and advanced his face until he and his prey were virtually nose to nose. "Where," he asked, breathing heavily and menacingly, "were you last night?"

The wretched Mr. Crump raised a trembling hand and eased his collar. "I had nothing to do with Will's death," he protested hoarsely. "I swear I didn't."

Dover raised a meaty fist. "Where were you?"

"I stayed on at the party. I stayed on for hours after Will had left, honestly I did. I can prove it, too. Anybody there will vouch for me. I didn't leave until one o'clock this morning."

Dover straightened. "What party?" he demanded. If there was one thing Dover disliked almost as much as work it was a surprise.

"Just a party," hedged Mr. Crump, looking shifty.

Dover refrained from battering out further details. He had other fish to fry. "And What's-his-name was at it?"

Mr. Crump nodded his aching head.

"Last night?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Dover, thoroughly disgusted with this unwelcome complication, retired to his settee and let MacGregor sort things out.

MacGregor moved in with a

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will and under his shrewd questioning it emerged that the dead man had, indeed, spent his last evening in this vale of tears at a party. There had been some sort of row or quarrel—Mr. Crump was not forthcoming about it and for the time MacGregor didn't press him—and Willoughby, considerably wrought up, had left at about half-past nine.

"How long would it take him to get back here?"

Mr. Crump shrugged helplessly. "Half an hour at that time of night, I should think."

MacGregor glanced at Dover to see if the significance of this had sunk in. It hadn't. Somewhat puzzled, MacGregor went over and whispered in Dover's ear. "Willoughby must have got back here last night, sir, at almost the same time as Miss X."

"So what?"

"Well, nothing, really, sir, except that it just struck me as a bit odd. I mean, if he was expecting her to call, you wouldn't think he'd have gone out for the evening, would you?"

"God knows," said Dover irritably.

Since this appeared to be the only contribution the Chief Inspector was going to make to the discussion, MacGregor returned to Mr. Crump and tried a new line of questioning. "Do you know Mr. Willoughby's ex-wife, sir? Mrs. Lucian?"

"No." Mr. Crump looked fractionally happier with the change of topic. "They were already divorced when I met him."

"What was the relationship between them?"

"I don't know how she felt about Will but he was very bitter about her. Especially when he'd had a few drinks. He used to claim she'd let him down and he blamed her and the breakup of his marriage for all his troubles."

"He had a grudge against her?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so. He could get to be quite a bore about it at times, threatening to get even with her one day and make her sorry for all she'd done to him." Mr. Crump looked anxiously at MacGregor. "It was all talk, you know."

"You can say that again," came from the settee. "Look, Sergeant, just get the names and addresses of the people who were at this party and then we can start busting this creep's phony alibi."

With MacGregor's attention momentarily distracted by the dulcet tones of his master's voice, Mr. Crump misguidedly decided to make a run for it.

He didn't get very far.

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MacGregor brought him down with a flying tackle before Crump even reached the door, and Dover, staggering up when all the excitement was over, joyfully extinguished the dying sparks of resistance with his boot.

It was a sadder and sorer Mr. Crump who eventually recovered sufficiently to resume his place on the hot seat. "I simply can't give you the names and addresses," he moaned, with the tears trickling down his cheeks. "I simply can't!"

"Want a bet?" chuckled Dover, bunching his fist and flourishing it under Mr. Crump's nose.

"But they'll just deny they were there!" sobbed Mr. Crump. "I know they will."

Dover scowled. "What sort of a party was this, for God's sake?"

In the end, when Mr. Crump had been forcefully persuaded that further silence would certainly result in his nose being bloodied, his eyes blacked, and his teeth smashed down his throat, he resolved to reveal all. "It was a dressing-up party," he whispered in a barely audible voice. "Just a bit of harmless fun, you know."

He got his handkerchief out and blew his nose with considerable pathos. "Cross-dressing, we call it. Men dressed up as"—he choked on the word—"women."

Dover gasped.

MacGregor was more sophisticated. "You mean it was a transvestite party?"

"Yes," murmured Mr. Crump. "We meet about once a fortnight. Or"—he added miserably—"we did. I suppose this'll be the end of it now!"

MacGregor was beginning to see the light. "Willoughby was a transvestite?"

"One of the best. He used to brag that he could pass for a woman anywhere."

"I see! So all those women's clothes in the spare bedroom are his?"

"He spent a fortune on them," sighed Mr. Crump enviously.

"And last night he changed into drag here in the flat and traveled to and from your party in women's clothes?"

Mr. Crump brightened at the memory. "He looked quite, quite beautiful."

"Well, there we are, sir," said MacGregor, tossing a triumphant smile at Dover. "We needn't waste any more time searching for the elusive Miss X. 'She' was Willoughby himself."

"He called himself Rosina when he was dressed," explained Mr. Crump helpfully. "I'm Betsy—though, of course, I'm not in Will's class by any

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means. I wouldn't dream of taking the risks he did."

"When we want any more of your reminiscences," snapped Dover, "we'll ask for 'em!" Having cowed Mr. Crump into silence Dover gave MacGregor a piece of his mind. "All you've established so far, clever devil, is that What's-his-name was as kinky as a dog's hind leg. You still haven't proved how he came to be dead."

MacGregor nobly forebore to point out that this was supposed to be Dover's job. "Oh, I think we've got the general picture now, sir," he said smugly. "I imagine Willoughby found that this transvestite business was beginning to be dangerous. After all, it's a pretty risky pastime, isn't it? He must have been scared stiff the whole thing would come out."

"Oh, it's a terrible strain," agreed Mr. Crump feelingly. "Will had wanted to stop for ages, but he just couldn't. He was terribly ashamed of himself, really. Then one of the other 'girls' said something bitchy to him last night and it all came pouring out. How he hated them and their silly primping and preening and how he hated himself for being like them. I thought he'd really come to the end of his tether this time but he stormed out before anybody could stop him."

"And came back here," said MacGregor, "changed into his pajamas and shot himself."

Dover was looking far from pleased. "In the wrong side of the head?" he objected. "Without leaving fingerprints on the gun? And in the dark?"

"Oh, I think that was all a rather silly attempt to throw the suspicion of murder on Mrs. Lucian, sir. That's why he phoned her and used her handkerchief to wrap around the gun. Mr. Crump says he blamed her for all his troubles. If she had turned up last night as Willoughby planned she should, we would certainly have had plenty of questions to ask her."

Dover was never one to face facts gracefully. "Nobody ever told me that he was wearing pajamas," he groused.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir," apologized MacGregor, tongue in cheek. "I thought you'd looked at the body."

Dover sniffed angrily. Much more of young MacGregor's lip and he'd— "Where did that handkerchief come from, then?"

"Left behind by Mrs. Lucian when she and Willoughby split up, don't you think, sir? A couple of handkerchiefs are easily overlooked."

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"Hm." Dover sighed deeply. "I said it was suicide right from the first," he pointed out pugnaciously.

"Indeed you did, sir." MacGregor looked at his watch. "Well, I think I'd better call off the search for Miss X and then I'll start getting the formal statements and begin on the report, shall I, sir? Unless"—he bethought himself rather naughtily—"you'd prefer to do it yourself, sir?"

Dover stored that up for later retaliation. "I've got plenty to keep me busy here," he said, as much for Mr. Crump's benefit as for MacGregor's. "And on your way out tell that young copper I'm ready for my tea!"

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"Every person is vain enough to think he or she has a unique story to tell"...

LIFE STORY

by RICHARD CURTIS

I'd been staring at the blank sheet of paper in my typewriter for half an hour when the phone rang. "Les? Irving here."

"Irving, Irving," I muttered. "I have an agent named Irving, but I'm certain he lost my phone number months ago."

"I thought you wanted to be left alone to write your novel," he answered. "How's it coming?"

"I'm polishing the first paragraph and I've got the second one outlined."

"In other words, you're hungry," he said. "Well, good. I have an assignment, may make you a few pennies. Kind of downbeat. Right up your alley."

"What is it?"

"Dame walks into the agency this morning, in her fifties but good-looking, well dressed. Obviously has money. Says her name is Desire Shannon, but admits that's not her real name. Says she was well known on the stage in her day, had a fascinating life, do I have a client who might be interested in writing her autobiography."

"You know I don't take on that kind of stuff."

"She says she'd pay three thousand against half the royalties from the sale of the book."

"Assuming the book is salable. Three thousand, huh? Did she say what makes her life so special?"

"Just hinted at some passionate affairs, a couple of interesting marriages. No one I ever heard of, but she says the details are spicy," Irving said. "Doesn't hurt you to listen to her for an hour or two."

"Yes, it does."

"She'll pay fifty dollars for your time."

"Send her up."

"She's already on the way. I gave her a big pitch about you, so don't be surprised if she jumps into your arms as soon as you open the door."

I flopped into my armchair. "Look, Irving, I don't want you to think I'm not eager to work,

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but unless this—Desire?—has the story of the century—"

"Call me." He hung up.

I went back to my desk. My mind suddenly bristled with ideas for handling my stalled book. Perversely, the prospect of a boring assignment like ghost-writing some has-been's life was just the inspiration I'd needed to resume my novel. I'd turned out half a dozen pages by the time the doorbell rang.

Desire Shannon fulfilled every expectation I'd conjured up. She wore an expensive lavender wool suit with matching accessories, a mink stole, high-heeled, pointy-toed shoes—well dressed, but dressed for a different decade. Her hair was dyed an unreal platinum and ineptly coifed. Her face was bony, her cheeks were sunken, she had dark rings under the eyes, too much make-up, and she wore ruby lipstick. Her voice, when she introduced herself, completed the picture—sinusy overtones betraying a woman who drank, or had once drunk, a lot of liquor.

"Your agent told me you're a first-class writer," she said, removing her stole with a flourish. She went to the sofa, sat down, crossed her legs, and lit a cigarette.

"He also must have told you my fee for consultations is fifty dollars, payable in advance."

She glared at me while drawing fifty dollars out of her purse. Then, puffing hostilely on her cigarette, she said, "Well, like your agent may have told you, my name isn't really Desire Shannon. I'll tell you what it is if you decide my story is worth writing."

"And what *is* your story?" I asked, pushing the five tens into my shirt pocket.

She glared at me again. "Are you really interested? You don't sound it."

"You've got to make me interested," I replied.

"Yes. Well." She sighed, wishing, I suspect, she were holding the bracing highball I was resolutely determined not to offer her. "Well, since your time is *obviously* limited, I'll skip over my youthful follies and begin with my early days on the stage, where I met my first husband—call him Harry. People are always flabbergasted when I tell them how we met. I was acting in a little thing, long since forgotten, called 'The State of Her Affairs.' After the third performance, while taking my bows, the curtain, a big heavy velvet thing with lead weights, struck me in the back. Harry, a doctor, was in the audience and treated me for the next couple of months. The amazing thing is that we had gone to grade school together in

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Missoula, Montana, and had never looked twice at each other. Now isn't that something?"

"That's something all right," I said, suppressing a yawn. It was about as interesting as a Congressional hearing on farm subsidies.

"Harry and I lived five happily married years together. We moved out to Yonkers and I quit acting. Then Harry passed on—he ate some spoiled fish and died of food poisoning. Luckily Harry's best friend, Arthur Castle, who owned half the forest land in upper New York State, had secretly doted on me, and he offered his hand as soon as it was proper. And that's one thing I want to emphasize straight off, young man," Desire declared, pointing her forefinger at me. "I was never unfaithful to Harry. In fact, I never stepped out on any of my husbands."

"That's too bad," I said.

"Too bad?"

"Yes. Virtuous women make dull reading."

She puckered her mouth thoughtfully. "I suppose that's so. But so many other exciting things happened to me during my marriages, or between them, there'll be plenty to hold your readers' interest without scandal. Besides, there's too much sordid stuff being published these days. Anyway, Serge, my third husband—Arthur fell off a cliff while we were on a camping trip—Serge was entirely different. . ."

Desire's monologue went on interminably, through tedious courtships, dull marriages, unprovocative flirtations, humdrum travels, insipid remembrances, unoriginal opinions. I actually dozed at one point, awoke and nodded through another hour of boring adventures. Then suddenly the ennui was shattered as Desire moaned, "It's awful, isn't it?"

"Huh? What's awful? Did I miss something?"

"My life story. It's perfectly awful," she sobbed. "It's dull as dishwater."

I was stricken with remorse. The woman's life *had* been pathetically empty, but the least I could have done for $50 was to appear interested. "No, it's quite stimulating, actually," I said feebly.

"It isn't at all. I've been listening to myself talk for the last five minutes, and all I've heard is a dreadful bore." She rose with greater dignity than I'd have thought she was capable of, picked up her stole, and headed for the door.

"Please, I didn't mean to—"

"No, you've done me a great favor," she said. "I suppose every person is vain enough to

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think he or she has a unique story to tell. It's a precious lesson in humility for me to realize that my life story is really uninspiring. Thank you for your great patience."

She held my face in her hands, kissed my brow, then swept out of my studio. I felt like a heel—at least, for the next few minutes. But I told myself it was all for the best.

I phoned my agent Irving. "I'm mailing you a check for five bucks, your commission. That's all you're going to make off Desire Shannon."

"No good, huh?"

"Irv, it was the deadliest story I've ever heard. The kind of thing barflies lay on you when they find out you're a writer. Not a whit of redeeming excitement anywhere in her tale. *Seven* husbands she had. You'd expect great dramatic possibilities, right? But not a single one of her marriages ended in divorce. And she never had an extramarital affair. Not a whisper of scandal. Why, she never so much as—"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Irv interrupted. "What do you mean, seven husbands and she never divorced any. What happened to them?"

"They all died, one way or another. And with a monumental lack of consideration for future biographers. Seven of the most tedious deaths in the annals of mortality. One died of food poisoning, another fell off a cliff, another in a boating accident . . . I mean, if just one of them had been shot in a lovers' quarrel or something interesting like that—"

Irving's voice rose in volume and pitch. "Just a minute, Les. You mean to tell me all seven of this dame's husbands died in accidents?"

"Yes. The fifth one, for instance—"

"None from natural causes?"

"Nope. The sixth—well, now, he took the cake for dullness. He was—"

"Les, don't you find that a little hard to believe?"

"I—uh, no. Well, now that you mention it . . . Hey, what do you have in mind? You don't think—"

"She left yet?"

"Hold on a second." I rushed to my window, but only to see the hem of Desire's skirt disappearing into a taxi.

I returned to the phone. "She's gone, Irv."

"Did you get her real name? Address? Anything?" I just shook my head, and Irving knew I was shaking my head. After a long silence he said, "You blew it, kid."

"Yep, I blew it all right," I said, nodding lugubriously. "The story of the century."

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Once more, as might have been expected, we encounter lean days. This month, it must be reported, only one new novel should merit your attraction. With reprints, however, I have had the luck of the draw. In paperback, everywhere available, you will now find three supplementary high cards: two detective classics of thirty-odd years ago, and one mystery-adventure-fantasy, with cloak-and-dagger overtones, undiminished for verve and sparkle since its first appearance in 1908.

To unravel the tangle of *And Shame the Devil*, by Sara Woods (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $4.95), again Antony Maitland, that very sympathetic barrister-detective, champions hopeless clients as with equal skill or quixotry he juggles a hot potato.

Arkenshaw, Yorkshire, has racial *(i.e.*, prejudice?) problems not unlike our own. Two Pakistanis, newcomers to this hard-headed community, have been arrested on a charge of burglary by dour Sergeant Duckett and young Constable Ryder. Acquitted by the court, Ghulam Beas and Chakwal Mohamad bring suit for false arrest.

Briefed by the defense, Antony Maitland encounters storms domestic as well as legal. Admitting prejudice, Sergeant Duckworth, supported by his handsome daughter and fiery "Grandma," all the same seems an honest man. But what of the evidence against him?

Though at first Maitland can see no villain, some shape of evil becomes evident when courtroom tension explodes in a poisoning mystery on the very doorstep of the law. Aided by none other than distinguished opposing counsel, Kevin O'Brien, Maitland fits together every clue. Once more Miss Woods, with all her usual ingenuity and charm of style, has written a detective novel which connoisseurs must read.

Originally published in 1931, *The Rynox Murder* by Philip MacDonald (Avon, 95¢) strikes a note of the topsy-turvy from its startling first scene to its equally startling end. Prologue and

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epilogue seem to have been turned the wrong way round.

At once we are involved with F. X. Benedik, financial wizard, as well as F. X.'s son and various associates, including delectable Petronella. Then the fusillade of shots in quiet Kensington, the body across the window-sill, touch off a pyrotechnic problem which dazzles eyesight.

There is no official investigator; you yourself are the sleuth for a deception so full of tricks that you must watch every step. Mr. MacDonald, past master at devising pratfalls, uses fair play itself to hoodwink us as he shows that the topsy-turvy may also be the right side up. Thus, as always, Q.E.D.

Though your mentor would never hold that early stories are always best stories, *The League of Frightened Men* by Rex Stout (Pyramid, 75¢) features Gargantuan Nero Wolfe in an early exploit which has always been my favorite.

The men of the title, once college classmates, are for the most part worthy citizens, solid and successful. Yet they walk in fear of a revengeful outcast, Paul Chapin, whom their undergraduate prank has crippled for life. The judge fell to death from a cliff; the art dealer drank poison; the psychologist has vanished. Though murder can't be proved, their unearthly cripple boasts of it. Prospective victims will pay Nero Wolfe a large sum—Wolfe himself has so maneuvered matters—if he can save them from Chapin and remove the menace.

The sage of West 35th Street, enthroned behind his desk, has never been move impressive. He points out another side to the gospel of violence; he proves who killed whom and why; he picks up the marbles. Both Wolfe and his creator being past masters of hoodwinkery, they have combined their talents in a true classic.

In my boyhood, before I had met Father Brown, G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (Ballantine, 95¢) introduced me to the writer who became my literary idol. Though subtitled "a nightmare," it glitters with the wit, the vividness, the excitement, the ingenuity of G.K.C.'s detective fiction; even its fantasy is rooted in common sense.

Gabriel Syme, poet-detective, must track down a conspiracy of anarchists whose seven leaders have been named for the days of the week. Hilarious high jinks carry him from his first challenge to the chase through London with a fleet of cabs, a fire-engine, an elephant, and a balloon. Whatever the philosophic meaning, you will find it glorious entertainment.

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This is the 366th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . .

The author, Francis M. Nevins, Jr., was born in 1943, received his law degree from New York University of Law in 1967, was admitted to the New Jersey bar the same year, has been an editor for a New York City law publisher, has practiced law as a Legal Services "storefront lawyer," and at the time of this writing is Assistant Professor of Law at St. Louis University Law School.

"Mike" (as he is known to his friends) has already achieved an enviable career in nonfictional areas of the mystery field, and he is only just beginning. He has written numerous articles, including one on "the wild and woolly world of Harry Stephen Keeler." He has edited an excellent book of essays on crime fiction, THE MYSTERY WRITER'S ART *(Bowling Green University Press, 1971), and a collection of stories by the late Cornell Woolrich,* NIGHTWEBS *(Harper & Row, 1971), which contains an indispensable Woolrich bibliography (the latter compiled in collaboration with Harold Knott and William Thailing). Currently Mr. Nevins is finishing "Royal Bloodline," a book-length study of the EQ opera. And there are other important projects in the test tubes.*

Now Mr. Nevins has turned to fiction. His "first story" is a kind of pastiche—strange, unusual, subtle. The case it explores is one of "wheels within wheels"—a new variant of what might be called "a locked room within a locked room"; a curious case full of hints, echoes, and intimations of certain books which your Editor hopes are familiar to most readers of EQMM.

Read and enjoy. . .

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OPEN LETTER TO SURVIVORS

by FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

"... there was the case of Adelina Monquieux, his remarkable solution of which cannot be revealed before 1972 by agreement with that curious lady's executors ..."

ELLERY QUEEN, *Ten Days' Wonder* (1948)

The book was conceived only in part, the rest of it was still struggling for conception inside him. A large and vicious neighborhood cat, some lines from Jung, a long wait in a subway station in the stifling postmidnight hours of a torrid summer, were all parts of the organism fighting for birth. But something was missing, some vital element. And when he realized that what he and the book needed was total immersion in the postwar international nightmare, he picked up his phone and called Burt Billings, who was his attorney, his friend, and, as he happened to know, the attorney for Adelina Monquieux.

The indomitable, the inimitable, the incredible Adelina—or, to use her professional name (though she had never married), Mrs. Monquieux, pronounced Mon-Q, not monkey. She was the last of an asset-studded line and the foremost political analyst of the generation. Her gargoyle face with its luminously intelligent eyes had made the cover of *Time* three years earlier, soon after Hiroshima; the artist had sketched endless cameos of death within the tangles of her unkempt henna hair.

The feature story in *Time* had chronicled her travels through Europe and Asia during the Thirties and most of the war years, the disenchanted brilliance of her many books and articles on international politics, and her unrelieved pessimism about mankind. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki she had written an essay boiling with humane fury titled "God Damn Us Every One," had changed her will so that most of her wealth would be left for the care of the bomb's victims, and had retired to the family estate to brood and write.

Billings called back within an hour: the great lady would talk with him the following Sunday at noon.

He drove out of the city early Sunday morning, the cloudless

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sky like blue glass and promising thick heat before noon. He had spent Saturday rereading the *Time* story and leafing through some of the woman's books. He had learned that she lived on the estate with the three orphans of World War I whom she had adopted as her sons and with a niece who did her secretarial work. He had learned that she had come to believe that no man can govern a modern nation-state without raining hideous atrocities on his own people and on his country's neighbors. He thought he had detected a certain oscillation in her between an idealistic anarchism in the Thoreau tradition and a Swiftian disgust with the entire race. All in all a fascinating woman, combining a large fortune with a desolate philosophy, a dazzling mind with a dumpy body. He looked forward to the meeting with relish.

At 11:00 he spun the new '48 Roadmaster off the Taugus Parkway and the wheels crunched gravel up the steep slope of the drive, which was only five miles beyond where that gas-station attendant had said the turnoff would be. Then suddenly he had crested the peak and a lush cool bed of forest spread below him, with a squarish block of stone seeming no larger than a child's toy in a wide clearing near the center.

Fortress Monquieux.

He descended.

From the radio speaker a voice intoned headlines. Civil war in Greece. Blockade threat against Berlin. Crisis in Czechoslovakia. The infant state of Israel struggling for survival. Truman denounces Stalin. Stalin condemns Truman. God, what a world, he thought. Maybe Adelina's right: who would choose to be born?

On such gloomy reflections he maneuvered the Roadmaster along the curves of the descent and through the tangled green tunnel of forest, finally through a stone archway and into the parking circle at the side of the Fortress. He pocketed his keys and strolled past time-faded classical sculptures in beds of ill-kept greenery. His wrist watch read 11:26, and he hoped he wasn't unconscionably early.

Half a minute after his ring the massive front door opened and he was ushered in by a tall well-built fellow in his early thirties, with crisp dark hair. Over shirtsleeves the young man wore an expensive-looking summer gray dressing gown, monogrammed X at the breast. "Hello and come in," he invited, smiling like a headwaiter. "I am Xavier Monquieux and I've read most of your books at least twice."

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"Delighted to hear it. You must be one of Mrs. Monquieux's foster sons."

"Right," Xavier said. "And if you'll step in here—" he led the way into a high-ceilinged room of immense size, filled with books and overstuffed furniture "—you can meet my brothers. This is Yves; and this is Zachary."

Two more tall well-built fellows in their early thirties stepped forward from the mahogany bar, each with crisp dark hair, each with a gin-and-tonic in his hand, each wearing an expensive-looking summer gray dressing gown over shirtsleeves. They were as close in resemblance to Xavier and to each other as three prints of the same photograph. Only the gold letters of their monograms distinguished them: one wore a Y, the other a Z.

"I hadn't realized you were identical triplets," he said inanely as he accepted a light Scotch-and-water from Yves.

"Monozygotic is the technical word, or at least it was when I was in med school," Yves corrected. "Identical down to our fingertips. No one but Adelina can tell us apart and God knows how she does it. We're biological rarities but it's sort of fun, switching on dates and things like that."

"And speaking of girls, *mon frere*," Zachary cut in, "the young ladies ought to be here any minute, so perhaps we should get into our trunks and make sure the liquor cart's stocked up. It was very nice to have met you, sir, and after you've talked to Adelina I'm sure we could find a bathing suit your size if you'd care for a dip." And Zachary and Yves bowed themselves out of the room, the sound of their feet becoming audible a few moments later when they ascended a staircase.

"No sense of the finer things," Xavier clucked disapprovingly. "Imagine preferring a swim to a chat with a famous mystery writer. I'm afraid bookishness has rubbed off only on me. Most of these are mine," he added, sweeping his hand to indicate the crammed shelves.

"Do your brothers have any passions of their own?"

"Oh, yes—we don't have to work for our keep, of course, but all of us got enough boredom in the military during the recent war to ever want to sit around doing nothing again. Yves had a year of medical school before he was drafted and may go back some day, and he's also an amateur concert violinist. Zach is a fanatic stamp collector and he has secret dreams of being a Hollywood star . . . If you'll excuse me I'll go downstairs and tell Adelina

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you're here." He moved lightly out of the room.

Like most writers and many readers, the guest had an insatiable urge to inspect the contents of all bookshelves that chanced within his eye. He was glancing over a large hand-rubbed cabinet devoted to the modern European novel, with Mann and Sartre and Silone well represented, when a feminine cough behind him gave notice that he was no longer alone. A tall blonde in beige was inspecting him through heavy-rimmed glasses as though he were a signed first edition of something curious.

"Aunt Adelina apologizes," she said, "but she's all tied up in a chapter of her memoirs and won't be free for another little while. I'm Marie Dumont, her niece several degrees removed or something like that. Also her secretary and all-around drudge. She asked me to amuse you for a few minutes."

She said nothing more for about thirty seconds, as though she had no idea how to amuse a male guest. Then, "I understand you want to sort of pick her brains for political atmosphere on a book you're doing? I think you might get more mileage out of her crazy will—you know about that, don't you? When Aunt Adelina dies, the three boys each get half a million outright and the income from another half million held in trust. The remaining twenty million or so after taxes will build and support a hospital to take care of the children we bombed in Japan. But—and here comes the catch—if the safe in her office downstairs is opened by anyone, for any reason, sooner than twenty-four years after her death, all the hospital money is immediately transferred to the Flat Earth Society."

"That *is* a strange will," he commented politely, although something about its terms had already begun to gnaw at him and he was not sure what. "What's in the safe that would lead her to protect it that way?"

"Even I'm not sure and I've been her secretary for twelve years. It's in the manuscript of her memoirs, which she calls *Open Letter to Survivors*, that's all I know. She's writing it in longhand, you see. When she's not actually working on it the manuscript is kept in that safe, and the safe is always locked whether she's working on the book or not. Only she and I and her attorney know the combination. When you think how much of the inside history of the past thirty years must be in those pages, how governments might topple if the secrets leaked out—well, you can see why she takes such precautions."

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"Do you inherit anything under the will?"

She shrugged. "A few hundred thousand, I think. Not enough to make up for twelve years of stagnation in this place."

"You could have left."

"You can't pull yourself out of the center of a whirlpool," she said. Which he cynically construed as: you don't throw away free room and board and a guaranteed two or three hundred thousand. "Well, I think she may be done by now, it's almost noon. Let's go down to her office and see."

And she led him along a vast foyer full of Victorian statuary and ancestral portraits and down a steep spiral staircase that ended in the center of a sort of anteroom. A functional secretarial desk, piled with papers and folders, stood against the far wall. A few comfortable chairs, occasional tables holding wrought-iron lamps and current magazines, strategically placed smoking stands—it reminded him somehow of a prosperous dentist's waiting room.

Marie Dumont knocked on the door to an inner office, then poked her head in. "Ready yet?"

"Please show him in," he heard a deep rich voice reply, and a moment later he stood before her teakwood desk in the center of the big windowless room. On the wall to his left, hanging above the squat and forbiddingly shut steel safe, was a tranquil landscape in oils. Adelina Monquieux was seated in a red-leather armchair behind the desk, her henna hair in wild disarray, her spectacles askew on her Roman nose, looking like an intelligent gargoyle.

"I'm so pleased to meet you," she said, touching a thick loose-leaf binder of tough material filled with paper—the only object on the desk except for the blotter, an old-fashioned fountain pen, a small table lamp, and a wicked-looking letter opener. "I'm through writing for the day, and my pen has gone dry anyway. It will take me just a few minutes to read my morning's stint, and then I will be glad to give you all the time you desire. Tell me, do you think our survivors, assuming we have any, will appreciate reading the truth about our time?"

She asked the question with mixed bitterness and resignation, as if being witness to three decades of international politics had burned into her the inevitability of man's greed and stupidity and corruption. When she smiled at him it was like the grin he had seen on the faces of the dead.

It was only after he had closed the door gently behind him that he realized he had not said a word to her.

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The silence in the anteroom was oppressive and he needed to make conversation. He turned to Marie Dumont who was seated at her own desk. "Does she do all her writing in there?" he asked, not really concerned to know.

"Ever since she inherited the house and had the basement done over. It's a perfect workroom—soundproof, no windows, no distractions, and that door is the only way in or out. Even the bathroom is outside here."

She suddenly gestured up to one of the windows and he heard the noise of splashing and gay squeals coming, he gathered, from the swimming pool. "The girls must have arrived. Peaceful sounds like that drive Aunt Adelina to distraction when she's working, even though she must have been in a dozen air raids in Europe. That's why she had her office soundproofed. By the way, did you notice the English country scene above the safe? That was painted by Churchill."

They both looked up as light footsteps sounded on the spiral stairs and one of the triplets appeared, barefoot and wearing only dark-blue swim trunks. He did not break stride but went right to the inner door, tossing a casual "Have to see Adelina for a minute" over his shoulder.

The triplet gave a perfunctory knock on the inner door and entered, shutting the door behind him. The cuckoo clock on the wall above Marie Dumont's desk announced that the hour was noon. The wooden bird had just cuckooed his last and retreated behind his tiny door when the big door opened again and the triplet walked out and over to the staircase and mounted.

"I wonder what that was all about."

"I don't know," Marie replied. "But I think Aunt Adelina must be through by now. I'll check."

She knocked lightly, stepped in, closed the door, and in less than a minute was back, her face sick-white.

"My God, she's dead," she kept whispering hoarsely.

A wild thought seized him and he knew what had disturbed him about the will: *If she died with the manuscript still on her desk, what good is that crazy 24-year clause? It will protect not the manuscript but just an empty safe.*

He rushed into the office. Adelina Monquieux lay sprawled in her chair, staring sightlessly through spectacles still askew. Blood ran from her heart. The manuscript of *Open Letter to Survivors* was not in sight and the safe was tight shut: he breathed relief.

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Then he noticed that the wicked-looking letter opener was not in sight either.

The cuckoo made five noises and popped back into his slot. The body of Adelina Monquieux—according to the medical examiner she had died within a minute after the blade had entered her—had been removed, and when it left most of the police technicians had left, too. The office and anteroom had been searched thoroughly and the letter opener had not been found. A few plainclothesmen still roamed the rooms and grounds haphazardly. Cody, the cigarillo-chewing Taugus County detective in charge, crushed his butt into a smoking stand disgustedly.

"What a cool customer we are dealing with, amigo," he said. "I wish I'd had him in my platoon behind Kraut lines in Normandy! He just walked right past you and the girl, stabbed the old lady to death with one blow of the letter opener, marched out past you again with the weapon, calm as you please, and went out to mingle with the girls at the pool. That, amigo, is a man with guts."

"And with a shrewd sense of psychology," the mystery writer added. "He figured that with my brief exposure to the triplets I couldn't tell them apart, and he must have known from experience that Miss Dumont couldn't either."

"That," Cody exploded, "is the hell of it. A big whodunit writer like you, a guy who's cleaned up umpteen cases for the New York force, and you can't even tell me what was the monogram on the killer's bathing suit, an X, a Y, or a Z."

"What bothers me more is that the letter opener that killed Mrs. Monquieux is missing. Why did the killer take it? To deprive us of his fingerprints? But why didn't he simply wipe his prints from the weapon right there in the office? Why did he take the much riskier step of removing the knife from his victim and carrying it past two witnesses in the anteroom? Was it impossible or impracticable for him to follow the safer course? Again—why?"

"Very clever, Mr. Genius," Cody snorted. "But changing the subject don't fool me. You didn't notice what monogram the killer was wearing."

"I don't think it would mean anything even if I did. We can't assume the guilty one didn't simply get hold of a monogram belonging to one of his brothers and sew it over his own, or even wear one of his brothers' bathing suits. By the way, what was the result of that test for bloodstains your technician performed on

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the three dark-blue bathing suits in the household?"

Cody waved a paper from the sheaf on his lap. "Absolutely no dice. My man examined 'em inside and out, and not a trace of a bloodstain. None of the old lady's blood splashed onto the killer's trunks. No, we can't solve this one the easy way, amigo. He killed her with one stab, so we'd have no bloodstains. And he's one of triplets, so for all practical purposes we got no one who saw him!" He cursed while taking out another cigarillo.

"Well, we can at least be thankful that Mrs. Monquieux put her manuscript back in the safe before he walked in and killed her. After all, it was much too thick for the killer to have walked past us with it unnoticed, and there's no way he could have destroyed it in the office itself—even the toilet is out here. So it's got to be back in the safe, and whatever Adelina Monquieux knew will stay under wraps for twenty-four years. Adelina? Pandora would have been a better name. By the way, you will keep a guard on that safe overnight till Mr. Billings and the truck come for it?"

"Damn right I will, I—hey, what's the matter with you?" For the distinguished litterateur across from Cody had suddenly risen and was pacing angrily.

"Scars," he muttered. "Look, the brothers mentioned to me this morning that they were all in the service during the war. Didn't any of them get wounded or scratched or marked somehow, even if only in a tattoo parlor? Can't we eliminate one or even two brothers on the ground that neither Miss Dumont nor I saw any marks on the killer?"

"Hell, no," Cody grunted. "Those boys spent their war in a nice safe psychological testing laboratory stateside. Y'see, they've got something between 'em that the eggheads call tele*pathy*—identical twins and triplets have it fairly often, so I'm told—and the Army had some crazy idea of finding out what causes it and using it to help spring Allied troops from enemy POW camps. The whole thing fell through, of course; there's no way of teaching that stuff to someone who ain't got it in the first place. Hell, if God wanted people to read each other's minds He wouldn't have given us vocal cords. Hey, what's got you now?"

"Don't you see? If each of the triplets can read the thoughts of the others, why can't we simply *ask them* who is the murderer?"

"Oh," Cody rumbled. "Reading your own storybooks again, hey, amigo? Well, first of all, to give you the kinda reason you enjoy, we couldn't rule out that the one guilty brother and one

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accomplice brother weren't framing the third innocent brother. Second, that tele*pathy* stuff can't be used in court anyway. And third—hell, except for the war I've lived in this community for thirty-seven years. I know those boys. I know they've done everything together their whole lives long. I know as well as I know I'm sitting here that all three of them were in on this murder. They drew straws or some such thing to see who'd do the actual dirty work. But you try to prove that in a court of law, amigo. You storybook writers don't have the first idea in the world the problems of a working cop."

His respect for Cody soared once the truth of a conspiracy among the brothers had sunk home. How could he not have seen it? From the moment he had rung the bell, every word and every action of those three smiling affable brothers had been as carefully calculated as a Broadway stage performance. Dressing identically, speaking with virtually identical modulations, each one doing or saying nothing that would stamp him as an individual in the mind of their guest. He had been manipulated like a puppet and he didn't like it. He stoked his pipe furiously.

Uselessly.

As the sun set he growled a goodbye to Cody and slunk out to his car and drove out of that monstrous valley through a tunnel of darkening forest and mocking bird cries . . .

Next day he read of the murder in the papers, noting idly the news that Adelina Monquieux's private Pandora's box had been crated up by her executors, the law firm of Billings & Krieger, and transferred to a chilled-steel bank vault in the city. *Open Letter to Survivors* having been made doubly inviolable, he tried to dismiss the whole Monquieux affair from his mind as a fiasco.

It was not until two months later that he saw what he should have seen while Adelina's body was still warm.

What triggered it was a piece of research. He had gone to the County Medical Association Library to look up some data on childbirth that he needed for his own novel-aborning; his serendipping eye had wandered from childbirth to infants and from infants to twins and to the precise differences between monozygotic and fraternal twins.

There it lay, buried in a mountain of medical jargon but unmistakable as a gold nugget in a coalpile.

Monozygotic twins, being genetically identical in every respect, are identical in fingerprints also.

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His mind took that fact and raced with it.

Three minutes later he was out of the library with a slam of the door and the glares of several peeved medicos behind him.

He dashed into his apartment and dialed Billings & Krieger, demanding to speak to Mr. Billings at once on a matter a thousand times more urgent than mere life-and-death. When he had the attorney on the line he was brief and to the point. "Burt, can we use your office tonight for a conference on the Monquieux case?"

Billings sounded puzzled. "What's up? Why my office?" Then, after a moment, "Hey, you haven't solved the murder by any chance, have you?"

"In one way I think I have, in another way, no . . . I'm sorry, Burt, that's all I can say now. Eight o'clock all right with you? I'll need both you and Mr. Krieger, in your capacity as executors. And I'm going to have Cody there, too—you remember him? Thanks a million, Burt, see you at eight." He hung up and placed a call to Cody who agreed to attend the meeting.

Shortly after dinner he made an excuse to go out, leaving the dishes to his long-suffering father, and paced the neon-washed streets, marshaling his thoughts, until 7:45 when he hailed a cab. Ten minutes later he stepped into the offices of Billings & Krieger. Burt and Cody were already present, and James B. Krieger, who looked like a starving mouse, came in shortly. Introductions were exchanged, hands shaken, chairs pulled up to the conference room's long table.

He began by explaining the fact of identical fingerprints in monozygotics. "Of course the great bulk of mystery stories—my own included, I blush to say—have spread the impression that each set of prints is unique, that no one's prints are the same as any other person's. The man in the street accepts without question that every man's prints are exclusively his own, but, as I've indicated, it's just not so. Therefore we must conclude—of course we can verify this with no trouble at all—that Xavier, Yves, and Zachary Monquieux have identical fingerprints. Now, what follows from that?

"First, it reminded me that all three brothers must be aware of this fact; for it was Yves, talking to me, who used the word monozygotic, and even used the phrase 'identical down to our fingertips,' which is quite literally true.

"Secondly, it satisfied me that we had completely misinterpreted the whole matter of the missing letter opener. We

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had assumed two things: A, that the person who took it out of the office was the murderer; B, that possibly his motive was to deprive us of his fingerprints, which for some unknown reason he could not simply wipe off on the spot. We now know that B is a completely false assumption: all three brothers know their prints are identical and know, therefore, their prints would be of no use to us. So the killer's reason for taking away the knife could not have been what we thought it was. Gentlemen, can any of you suggest another reason?"

Silence. Cody chewed his cigarillo.

"Nor can I. In fact—and I kick myself for missing this two months ago—not only had he no reason, but it was *physically impossible* for the killer to have taken the letter opener with him!

"Marie Dumont and I observed the killer walk out of his victim's office and he certainly wasn't holding the opener in his hands. Could he have concealed it in his clothes? Well, he was wearing only a bathing suit; the letter opener might have been slipped inside the suit. But you told me, Cody, that there was not the slightest trace of a bloodstain on any of the three dark-blue pairs of trunks that could possibly have been worn by the murderer—*inside or out.* Certainly if he had carried out that bloody weapon inside his trunks, you *would* have found traces. Conclusion: the murderer did not, because he could not, take the weapon away."

"Then what happened to it?" Cody demanded. "Because my men searched that office with a fine-tooth comb and it sure as hell wasn't there!"

"Patience, Cody, patience. Now, let's tackle the problem from another direction. Who had the opportunity to hide or remove the opener between the time I spoke to Mrs. Monquieux a few minutes before her death and the time Marie Dumont and I entered the office shortly after her death and learned that the opener was missing? When I phrase it that way, you can't miss it. *Only one person* set foot in the office during that brief interval. And that was Marie Dumont, who you'll recall was alone in there for almost a minute before she stumbled out to announce that her aunt was dead.

"Now, can the wings of reason bear us any higher? Yes, indeed," he assured his listeners. "Let's go back to your question, Cody—what did she do with the weapon? With me standing right outside the door, would she have concealed it in her clothes and

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taken a chance she could safely get rid of it later, with the police shortly to invade the premises? Not if she had a safer option, she wouldn't. Was there a safer option in that enclosed office?

"Yes, there was—a safer option, if you'll pardon the pun. Your men searched the entire office, Cody, but in view of the Monquieux will and of your plausible but false conclusion that the killer had taken the opener away with him, you didn't dare tamper with the safe, to which, I remind you, only Mrs. Monquieux and Miss Dumont and you, her attorney, Burt, know the combination.

"And since that safe was under police guard until your truckers removed it to the bank vault, Burt, I'll wager that letter opener is in the safe right now."

"My God," Billings muttered.

"But why would she have hidden the murder weapon like that?" James B. Krieger squeaked.

"If you mean her motive—whether she's in love with the murderer, or hopes to extort money or marriage out of him—I don't know, and its exact nature doesn't affect my analysis. But in a general way her motivation is clear: she intended to protect the murderer. Now, what is presupposed by such intent?"

Again silence.

"Don't you see that it presupposes *she knew which of the triplets* is the murderer?

"Now, did she know prior to the murder itself? Hardly, or she would never have revealed as much information to me as she did. Then she must have learned the truth *after* the murder. But then she had less than a minute, alone in that office, to see the truth, to make a decision, to hide the letter opener in the safe, to return to the doorway. It must have been something instantaneously apparent that revealed the truth to her.

"At this point, gentlemen, we are driven to speculation, but speculation solidly based on facts. Fact: your medical examiner told us, Cody, that Adelina Monquieux lived for perhaps a minute after being stabbed. Fact: Mrs. Monquieux's fountain pen had gone dry shortly before her death, so there was no usable writing implement on her desk. Fact: we don't *know* that it was Mrs. Monquieux herself who put away the manuscript of *Open Letter to Survivors.*

"Hypothesis: In the last moments of her life Adelina Monquieux—the only person on earth who could tell those brothers apart—pulled the knife from her body and slashed into

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the tough material of the binder of that manuscript the initial—that's all it would take to identify him—of her murderer. X, Y, or Z. This is what Marie Dumont saw when she entered the room. And to protect the murderer she had to conceal that manuscript cover. And being forced to open the safe to place the damning manuscript cover inside, she decided it would be safer to conceal the opener there also. She was counting on being able to remove both objects from the safe later, but circumstances and your truckers, Burt, frustrated her.

"Any questions, gentlemen?"

Cody was now sweating, as if from the strain of following the analysis. "Thank God you lawyers moved that safe to where we can still get at the evidence!"

Billings stared at him as if he had mumbled baby-talk. "But you can't get at it," he pointed out. "Mrs. Monquieux's will provides that the safe cannot be opened for any reason until the twenty-fourth anniversary of her death. If you violate that provision, the hospital for atom-bomb victims will not be built. How many lives is it worth to you to procure your evidence, your *hypothetical* evidence?"

Cody went down fighting. "Can't that will be broken? Hell, this isn't the kind of a situation the old lady had in mind when she made that crazy will."

"You can try to break it in the courts," Krieger said. "My considered opinion is that you won't succeed. And our duty as executors under the will, and as human beings, is to stop you."

Billings nodded. "Something even worse, Cody. Suppose the courts *did* rule that the opening of the safe by the police would not defeat the hospital bequest. If the analysis we've just heard is correct, the opening of the safe would disclose proof positive that the safe had *already* been opened immediately after our client's death. And that prior opening would be beyond the court's power to ignore. The end result being God knows how many dead war orphans, and a windfall for the Flat Earth Society."

Cody leveled a long series of curses at the law. No one in the room was hypocrite enough to contradict him.

"Well, as a professional writer," ventured the only professional writer present, "my hands aren't tied by that will. Why can't I publish my analysis of the case and at least let them know that I know, and maybe make them do something insane like attempting to silence me?"

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"You want a million-dollar libel suit slapped against you?" Billings boomed. "You forget you've got no solid evidence—not a shred!"

They sat in silence.

When he could take no more of it he rose, stretched his drained and aching body, and trudged wearily to the door. "I'm not in my dotage yet," he said, "and neither are they. I can wait; and after all, by waiting, we make sure the great bulk of the Monquieux estate goes to a decent cause. But I swear, Burt, that I will be there when you or your successor opens that safe twenty-four years from now. I'm going to see with my own eyes whether or not I was right . . .

"Gentlemen, I'll see you in 1972."

DETECTIVERSE

DEAR NGAIO MARSH

by JOHN D. MORSE

I would gladly spread your fame
If only I could say your gname.

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"Papa must be going mad if he had to protect Gloria like that"...

JOSEPHINE RIDER SAID

by MARY BARRETT

Annabelle Wharton sat at the table drinking her cup of coffee and looking out the window at the garden. She would have to speak to the gardener, she thought. Surely things were not quite as neat as they should be. Was that a mole hole she saw out there?

Annabelle Wharton would scold St. Peter for a speck of gold dust on the pearly gates, Josephine Rider said.

To a less critical eye the garden would appear to be well taken care of. The azaleas were in full bloom, shading from red to pink, the bushes evenly spaced, like soldiers, in a straight row beside the high wall. Between the azalea bushes, primroses raised their little blossoms on slender stalks—white, yellow, pink. But Annabelle's eye was always critical. She hated to see even one weed in the grass.

Annabelle Wharton won't give anything a toehold, Josephine Rider said; she's afraid it might take over.

Well, she needn't pay any attention to Josephine Rider, Annabelle often thought complacently. Why, you only needed to take one look at Josephine's living room to know what kind of person she was. Absolutely nothing in that room matched anything else. Annabelle couldn't have lived in that room for one single moment. And Josephine Rider had lived in that house for twenty years if she had lived there a day, without a maid coming in even once a month to straighten things up.

Josephine Rider just didn't care. Anyone could see that. A person could go into that house at any time of day and find unwashed dishes on the drainboard and dust filming the furniture. Josephine Rider would just be sitting there in all that mess, reading a new novel, or something just as nonsensical.

With Annabelle it was altogether different. She kept a fine house, full of lovely things

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that went together and enhanced one another. She had always been very careful, even long before that Gloria came to the house and long before Papa left. He never found anything to criticize. Annabelle saw to that.

Not that he ever had been critical, of course. It was just that both of them always liked to have pretty things around, and so they had been careful that nothing got broken or was ever out of place.

If Annabelle Wharton's Papa hadn't existed, she would have had to invent him, if only to justify her thousand daily rituals, Josephine Rider said.

Annabelle looked at the coffee, cold now in her cup. The maid must have taken the day off, although Annabelle didn't remember being consulted on the subject. Now that she thought about it, she couldn't remember just which maid was the current one. She frowned, perplexed. Oh, yes, she remembered now. The maid had brought her this coffee. She was in a white uniform, even though, of course, that was quite unnecessary. Such nonsense! To go to all that trouble about how she dressed and then without a by-your-leave to take off for the rest of the day!

What can you do? Everyone demands special treatment these days. She remembered when Papa was still here and the maid had come every single day, and kept pouring coffee until they were finished. Annabelle sighed for the past.

Oh, she had been spoiled, all right. Annabelle would be the first to admit that. Papa had seen to it that she never had to lift a finger if she didn't want to.

Of course, she had always poured tea for the two of them in the parlor each afternoon. That was a different matter. That wasn't work. It was pleasure. The silver tea service was always polished mirror-bright. The porcelain teacups were as thin as paper, and translucent. With little silver tongs she would put Papa's two lumps of sugar in his cup and hand it to him gracefully, her own hands as white and smooth as the porcelain itself.

They never lacked for things to say to each other, she and Papa; for they both read only the best books, only the classics. Over their teacups they talked pleasantly about Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding. Papa said that nothing decent had been written in the past fifty years. They didn't even subscribe to newspapers, full as they were of vulgarities and

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stories of violence. Of course, that was all before Gloria came to the house and changed things. Or tried to.

When that woman came on the scene, you would have thought that someone had told Annabelle Wharton to walk naked down Main Street; she was that upset, Josephine Rider said.

Papa was very handsome, and Annabelle was always pleased to be seen with him. They were a good-looking couple, she knew. Often on Sunday afternoons, if the weather was good, they had gone out walking. Papa was straight and tall, his white hair gleaming, perfectly groomed, in the sunlight. The stiff white cuffs of his shirt showed exactly the right length beneath the sleeves of his tailor-made suit. Her little hand, in a white glove, rested ever so lightly on his arm. He nodded very politely to people they met on the way.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Carter," he would say, in his deep cultured voice.

He knew everyone in town. Except, of course, the common people. Yet Annabelle and Papa never went calling, and no one called on them. They were company enough for each other. They needed no one else.

Some day someone will find them sitting at tea, turned to stone, Josephine Rider said; they won't know the difference, for all the life that's in them now.

It was a peaceful, orderly life. Then those strangely disquieting things began to happen. Only small things at first, but unsettling nonetheless.

The first thing Annabelle noticed was Papa's silver cuff links. They were sterling, a birthday gift from Mama. She had died years ago, but Papa still wore the cuff links every day. They were his great pride. Then one day Annabella noticed that he was wearing gold-plated cuff links, the common sort that you could buy in any cheap jewelry store.

"Papa," she said, "where are your silver cuff links?"

He looked at her with a very odd expression, almost as if he couldn't understand her asking.

"I'm sure I don't know, Annabelle," he said quietly, with just the smallest emphasis on "I."

And that was that. You could have blown Annabelle over with a cardboard fan. Nothing could have been more peculiar than Papa's dismissing such a matter so lightly. Yet there was such an odd tone of finality to his answer that she didn't bring up the subject again. That was the last anyone

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saw of Mama's birthday gift.

When Annabelle tried to piece everything together, she remembered that the silver cuff links disappeared soon after the first time Gloria came to the house. It might have been coincidence, of course. But then again, it might not have been.

Gloria's sudden appearance in their lives was strange in itself. It happened on a late summer afternoon, just at teatime. The doorbell rang. Annabelle was so startled she jumped a little, spilling some tea into her saucer. The tradespeople came to the back door. Annabelle couldn't remember when she had ever heard the front doorbell ring.

But Papa didn't seem the least bit upset or surprised. He simply stood up, wiped his lips with the napkin, and called to the maid, "It's all right. I'll go."

A few moments later he was back with this strange woman.

"Annabelle, this is Miss Garrison," he said. "She's going to stay for tea."

Just like that. No why or wherefore. No explanation of who she was, to sit in Annabelle's living room drinking tea from Annabelle's good porcelain, as bold as you please. Annabelle tried to put on a good front, but she was very upset.

Like a bowl of cold biscuit batter hit her right in the face, Josephine Rider said.

They didn't talk about Smollett, that afternoon, or Laurence Sterne. They didn't talk about much of anything. This Miss Garrison just sat there in the best chair, on Annabelle's own needlepoint cushion, and smiled pleasantly at her and at Papa.

She asked peculiar and impertinent questions. Annabelle glanced at Papa to see how he was taking it. She was amazed. He didn't seem to notice anything wrong at all. He just sat there looking pleased with himself, as if he had done something especially intelligent.

Miss Garrison asked, "Do you go out much, Miss Wharton, with your friends?"

"Papa and I don't need friends," Annabelle said. "We are company enough for each other." She didn't even care if she sounded rude, she was that upset. Miss Garrison didn't seem to notice anyway. She just smiled and went right on.

"Sooner or later everyone needs a friend," she said in that sort of professionally cheery voice which Annabelle disliked at once. "I'd like to be your friend if you'd let me."

Well, you could have knocked Annabelle off her chair with a fly swatter! Such

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nerve! "I'm sure that's very kind of you," she said coolly, pleased with herself for being so noncommittal.

That's the way it went, then and all the times after that when Gloria came to the house. She would sit there, trying to draw Annabelle out, trying to make her talk about herself, to promise to "get out more and meet people."

"Who is that woman, Papa?" she asked.

"She's just a nice person who wants to be friendly," he said, as if that explained anything.

Annabelle had never known Papa to behave so oddly. Was he losing his mind? True, he wasn't young any more. Perhaps he was getting senile. She must try to persuade him to see a doctor.

To make matters worse, more things disappeared. Little things at first, that only a careful person would notice were missing.

Annabelle Wharton would know if a gnat walked over the fireplace ashes, Josephine Rider said.

First, there was her sterling-silver baby spoon that she used every day to stir her tea. Mama had given it to her on her first birthday. And now it was gone, heaven knew where. It was valuable, too. Mama had ordered it specially made in New York.

She mentioned the spoon to Papa.

He only said, with that new puzzled look of his, "I'm sure it will turn up somewhere, Annabelle."

Annabelle knew very well that things didn't just turn up, any more than they just disappeared. Someone had to take them. And she had a fairly good notion who it was.

The next thing to vanish was their silver napkin rings, both hers and Papa's. And Mama's, too, she discovered, even though it was kept wrapped in tissue paper in the top drawer of the dining-room cabinet.

This time she didn't say anything. She waited for Papa to notice and comment.

He didn't say a word, even though every evening at dinner their napkins were now laid flat beside the plates. That first evening, it's true, he reached for his napkin ring, from habit. For a moment he looked a little surprised, the way a person does who feels a sudden draft when the doors are all closed. But he quickly took his napkin and put it in his lap, saying nothing.

Papa must be going mad if he had to protect Gloria like that. For he must see that she was the one who was taking things.

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She was the only unfamiliar element in their lives. Furthermore, Papa had always been particularly fond of silver things. They were a pleasure to the hand and the eye, he said.

Gloria still continued to come to the house, sometimes two or three times a week. She would simply appear at the door, smiling, expecting a welcome.

Annabelle was beginning to feel desperate.

Annabelle Wharton would have a frenzy if a breeze ruffled a hair on her head; she just couldn't stand change, Josephine Rider said.

Things got worse and worse. Mama's silver comb-and-brush set disappeared, even though they had always sat in the same place on her dresser, just as she left them when she died.

Then things began to disappear more and more rapidly. It was as if the thief were going berserk. The house would be stripped bare if something wasn't done. The silver watch, with its cunningly engraved lid, which Mama wore pinned to her dress every day of her married life, that was gone. Not three days later it was Mama's silver brooch, and then the matching silver earrings. Everything silver! And everything Mama's or a gift of Mama's. That Gloria was trying to obliterate the very memory of Mama! She was trying to hurt Papa in the most vicious way possible.

Still Papa said nothing. He pretended not to notice that anything was wrong. That was fantastic! He always had cherished Mama's things, especially the silver ones.

Annabelle stood it as long as she could. Finally she had to speak out.

"Papa," she said, "that woman is stealing us blind. You have to tell her not to come here any more. She'll take everything away from us."

"Whatever is happening, Annabelle, it's not Gloria's fault. You mustn't blame her. I may have made a mistake in bringing her here, but she isn't guilty of stealing things."

And then he just walked away.

Those were the last words she remembered Papa's saying to her. Had she even seen him since? She frowned her puzzled frown again, trying to remember.

There was a knock at the door, followed a moment later by the turning of a key in the lock. The door of the room opened and in walked Gloria, smiling as always. She wore a white uniform, too. Was she trying to look like a maid?

"It's visiting day,

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Annabelle," Gloria said. "Your friend Josephine Rider has come to see you. Isn't that nice?"

Someone has to visit the poor old thing, Josephine Rider said; they won't let her Papa come for fear of muddling her mind even more—she thinks she's still at home, for heaven's sake!

Annabelle looked at Gloria hatefully, saying nothing.

"If you promise to behave, the two of you can go outdoors in the sunshine. But remember, don't you try to dig up the dirt with your hands the way you did the last time, Annabelle."

Annabelle Wharton is crazy as a coot—I always thought so, but I knew it for a fact when I saw her bury her mother's silver things, one by one, in her garden. Her father was a fool to think that social worker, Gloria whatever-her-name-is, could stop her. No one could. I could have told them that, Josephine Rider said.

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a HERCULE POIROT story by

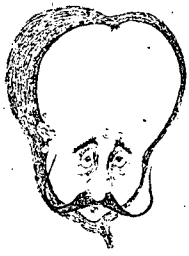
AGATHA CHRISTIE

Actually, "The Importance of a Leg of Mutton" is Chapter 4 in Agatha Christie's thriller-novel, THE BIG FOUR. *But, as you will see, it is a complete story in itself—indeed, it is one of Hercule Poirot's triumphs of deduction.*

A few explanations to make certain references in the story clearer: at the time of this story Poirot is a "consulting detective"—"as much a specialist as a Harley Street physician." He is investigating a "gang of international criminals" known as the Big Four—a monstrous conspiracy responsible for "world-wide unrest, the labor troubles that beset every nation, and the revolutions that break out in some." The Big Four is "the greatest power for evil in the world today," aiming at "nothing less than the disintegration of civilization."

An old seafaring man named Jonathan Whalley, who has revealing and dangerous information about the Big Four, is murdered in his home in broad daylight—in the kind of small English village where any stranger is quickly noticed. Yet no one saw the murderer enter or leave the scene of the crime. Whalley's manservant, Robert Grant, an ex-convict, has been arrested in what looks to the local Inspector Meadows as an open-and-shut case.

Now, join Hercule Poirot and the narrator, Poirot's "Watson" of earlier days, Captain Hastings . . .



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THE IMPORTANCE OF A LEG OF MUTTON

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

Inspector Meadows drew a key from his pocket and unlocked the door of Granite Bungalow. The day had been fine and dry, so our feet were not likely to leave any prints; nevertheless, we wiped them carefully on the mat.

A woman came up out of the gloom and spoke to the Inspector, and he turned aside. Then he spoke over his shoulder.

"Have a good look round, Mr. Poirot, and see all there is to be seen. I'll be back in about ten minutes. By the way, here's Grant's boot. I brought it along with me for you to compare the impressions."

We went into the living room, and the sound of the Inspector's footsteps died away outside. The floor was covered with a dark-green linoleum which was ideal for showing footprints. A door at the farther end led into the small kitchen. From there another door led into the scullery, where the back door was situated, and another into the bedroom which had been occupied by Robert Grant, Having explored the ground, Poirot commented on it in a low running monologue.

"Here is where the body lay; that big dark stain and the splashes all around mark the spot. Traces of carpet slippers and 'number nine' boots, you observe, but all very confused. Then two sets of tracks leading to and from the kitchen; whoever the murderer was, he came in that way. You have the boot, Hastings? Give it to me."

Poirot compared it carefully with the prints. "Yes, both made by the same man, Robert Grant. He came in that way, killed the old man, and went back to the kitchen. He had stepped in the blood; see the stains he left as he went out? Nothing to be seen in the kitchen—all the village has been walking about in it. He went into his own room—no, first he went back again to the scene of the crime—was that to get the little jade figures? Or had he forgotten something that might incriminate him?"

"Perhaps he killed the old man the second time he went in?" I suggested.

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"*Mais non*, you do not observe. On one of the outgoing footmarks stained with blood there is superimposed an ingoing one. I wonder what he went back for—the little jade figures as an afterthought? It is all ridiculous—stupid."

"Well, he's given himself away pretty hopelessly."

"*N'est-ce pas?* I tell you, Hastings, it goes against reason. It offends my little gray cells. Let us go into his bedroom—ah, yes, there is the smear of blood on the lintel and just a trace of footmarks—bloodstained ones. Robert Grant's footmarks, and his only, near the body—Robert Grant the only man who went near the house. Yes, it must be so."

"What about the old woman?" I said suddenly. "She was in the house alone after Grant had gone for the milk. She might have killed him and then gone out. Her feet would leave no prints if she hadn't been outside."

"Very good, Hastings. I wondered whether that hypothesis would occur to you. I had already thought of it and rejected it. Betsy Andrews is a local woman, well known hereabouts. She can have no connection with the Big Four; and, besides, old Whalley was a powerful fellow, by all accounts. This is a man's work—not a woman's."

"I suppose the Big Four couldn't have had some diabolical contrivance concealed in the ceiling—something which descended automatically and cut the old man's throat and was afterwards drawn up again?"

"Like Jacob's ladder? I know, Hastings, that you have an imagination of the most fertile—but I implore of you to keep it within bounds."

I subsided, abashed. Poirot continued to wander about, poking into rooms and cupboards with a profoundly dissatisfied expression on his face. Suddenly he uttered an excited yelp, reminiscent of a Pomeranian dog. I rushed to join him. He was standing in the larder in a dramatic attitude. In his hand he was brandishing a leg of mutton!

"My dear Poirot!" I cried. "What is the matter? Have you suddenly gone mad?"

"Regard, I pray you, this leg of mutton. But regard it closely!"

I regarded it as closely as I could, but could see nothing unusual about it. It seemed to me a very ordinary leg of mutton. I said as much. Poirot threw me a withering glance.

"But do you not see this—and this—and this—"

He illustrated each "this" with a jab at the unoffending

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joint, dislodging small icicles as he did so.

Poirot had just accused me of being imaginative, but I now felt that he was far more wildly so than I had ever been. Did he seriously think these slivers of ice were crystals of a deadly poison? That was the only construction I could put on his extraordinary agitation.

"It's frozen meat," I explained gently. "Imported, you know. New Zealand."

He stared at me for a moment or two and then broke into a strange laugh.

"How marvelous is my friend Hastings! He knows everything—but everything! How do they say—Inquire Within Upon Everything? That is my friend Hastings."

He flung down the leg of mutton onto its dish again and left the larder. Then he looked through the window.

"Here comes our friend the Inspector. It is well. I have seen all I want to see here." He drummed on the table absentmindedly, as though absorbed in calculation, and then asked suddenly, "What is the day of the week, *mon ami?*"

"Monday," I said, rather astonished. "What—?"

"Ah, Monday, is it? A bad day of the week. To commit a murder on a Monday is a mistake."

Passing back to the living room he tapped the glass on the wall and glanced at the thermometer.

"Set fair, and seventy degrees Fahrenheit. An orthodox English summer's day."

The Inspector came bustling in, apologizing for having been so long. He insisted on taking us over most of the ground again, but finally we got away.

"I appreciate your thousand politenesses, Inspector," said Poirot, as we were walking down the village street again. "There is just one more request I should like to put to you."

"You want to see the body, perhaps, sir?"

"Oh, dear me, no! I have not the least interest in the body. I want to see Robert Grant."

"You'll have to drive back with me to Moreton to see him, sir."

"Very well, I will do so. But I must see him and be able to speak to him alone."

The Inspector caressed his upper lip. "Well, I don't know about that, sir."

"I assure you that if you can get through to Scotland Yard you will receive full authority."

"I've heard of you, of course, sir, and I know you've done us a good turn now and again. But it's very irregular."

"Nevertheless, it is necessary," said Poirot calmly. "It is

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necessary for this reason—Grant is not the murderer."

"What? Who is, then?"

"The murderer was, I should fancy, a youngish man. He drove up to Granite Bungalow in a trap, which he left outside. He went in, committed the murder, came out, and drove away again. He was bareheaded, and his clothing was slightly bloodstained."

"But—but the whole village would have seen him!"

"Not under certain circumstances."

"Not if it was dark, perhaps; but the crime was committed in broad daylight."

Poirot merely smiled.

"And the horse and trap, sir—how could you tell that? Any amount of wheeled vehicles have passed along outside. There's no mark of one in particular to be seen."

"Not with the eyes of the body, perhaps; but with the eyes of the mind, yes."

The Inspector touched his forehead significantly with a grin at me. I was utterly bewildered, but I had faith in Poirot. Further discussion ended in our all driving back to Moreton with the Inspector. Poirot and I were taken to Grant, but a constable was to be present during the interview. Poirot went straight to the point.

"Grant, I know you to be innocent of this crime. Relate to me in your own words exactly what happened."

The prisoner was a man of medium height, with a somewhat unpleasing cast of features. He looked like a jailbird if ever a man did.

"Honest to God, I never did it," he whined. "Someone put those little glass figures among my traps. It was a frameup, that's what it was. I went straight to my rooms when I came in, like I said. I never knew a thing till Betsy screeched out. S'welp me God, I didn't."

Poirot rose. "If you can't tell me the truth, that is the end of it."

"But, guv'nor—"

"You *did* go into the room—you *did* know your master was dead; and you were just preparing to make a bolt of it when the good Betsy made her terrible discovery."

The man stared at Poirot with a dropped jaw.

"Come now, is it not so? I tell you solemnly—on my word of honor—that to be frank now is your only chance."

"I'll risk it," said the man suddenly. "It was just as you say. I came in and went straight to the master—and there he was, dead on the floor and blood all round. Then I got the

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wind up proper. They'd ferret out my record, and for a certainty they'd say it was me as done him in. My only thought was to get away—at once—before he was found—"

"And the jade figures?"

The man hesitated. "You see—"

"You took them by a kind of reversion to instinct, as it were? You had heard your master say that they were valuable, and you felt you might as well go the whole hog. That, I understand. Now, answer me this. Was it the second time that you went into the room that you took the figures?"

"I didn't go in a second time. Once was enough for me."

"You are sure of that?"

"Absolutely certain."

"Good. Now, when did you get out of prison?"

"Two months ago."

"How did you obtain this job?"

"Through one of them Prisoners Help Societies. Bloke met me when I came out."

"What was he like?"

"Not exactly a parson, but looked like one. Soft black hat and mincing way of talking. Got a broken front tooth. Spectacled chap. Saunders his name was. Said he hoped I was repentant, and that he'd find me a good post. I went to old Whalley on his recommendation."

Poirot rose once more. "I thank you. I know all now. Have patience." He paused in the doorway and added, "Saunders gave you a pair of boots, didn't he?"

Grant looked astonished. "Why, yes, he did. But how did you know?"

"It is my business to know things," said Hercule Poirot.

After a word or two with the Inspector the two of us went to the White Hart and discussed eggs and bacon and Devonshire cider.

"Any elucidations yet?" I asked, with a smile.

"Yes, the case is clear enough now; but I shall have a good deal of difficulty in proving it. Whalley was killed by order of the Big Four—but not by Grant. A very clever man got Grant the post and deliberately planned to make him the scapegoat—an easy matter with Grant's prison record. He gave him a pair of boots, one of two duplicate pairs. The other pair he kept himself.

"It was all so simple. When Grant is out of the house, and Betsy is chatting in the village—which she probably did every day of her life—he drives up wearing the duplicate boots.

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enters the kitchen, goes through into the living room, fells the old man with a blow, then cuts his throat. Then he returns to the kitchen, removes the boots, puts on another pair, and, carrying the first pair, goes out to his trap and drives off."

"There's a catch in it still," I said. "Why did nobody see him?"

"Ah! That is where the cleverness of the murderer, Number Four, comes in. Everybody saw him—and yet nobody saw him. You see, he drove up in a butcher's cart!"

I uttered an exclamation. "The leg of mutton?"

"Exactly, Hastings, the leg of mutton. Everybody swore that no one had been to Granite Bungalow that morning, but, nevertheless, I found in the larder a leg of mutton, *still frozen.* It was Monday, so the meat must have been delivered that morning; for if on Saturday, in this hot weather, it would not have remained frozen over Sunday. So some one *had* been to the Bungalow, and a man on whom a trace of blood here and there would attract no attention."

"Damned ingenious!" I cried approvingly.

"Yes, he is clever, Number Four."

"As clever as Hercule Poirot?" I murmured.

My friend threw me a glance of dignified reproach.

"There are some jests that you should not permit yourself, Hastings," he said sententiously. "Have I not saved an innocent man from being sent to the gallows? That is enough for one day."

CRIMINALIMERICK

POIROT-ING TROUBLE

by D. R. BENSEN

There are bodies polluting the wells;
Sir Luke's having one of his spells;
All is horror and sorrow,
But then Hercule Poirot
Sets things right with his little gray cells.

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The attack came silently, without warning.

THE WOMAN IN THE STONE HOUSE

by DANA LYON

The night was so beautiful it was almost unreal. The young couple, tired from the last hundred miles on the boy's Honda, could not resist the moon and the quiet and the soft air and the lap of the waves on the curved bay just beyond the road. They loved the utter desertion of this brief stretch of ocean which was seldom deserted, and felt it was time to rest.

The young man parked the motorcycle beside the road and only then did both of them notice the fieldstone house above them, beyond the trees, a mansion-type thing with pillars and a broad veranda and sloping lawns.

"Well, whaddaya know?" said the youth. "Not as deserted as we thought. How'd you like to live in a thing like that?" he said, taking her hand. "Want me to buy you one?"

"Out of the frying pan–" said the girl, and he laughed.

"After a crack like that," he rebuked her, "you must always add, 'to coin a phrase.' "

"Coin your own phrases," she said, and giggled. "Darling, you may get me a house like that there monstrosity when we're old folk of forty or so and then we'll settle down to the boring life of our parents. But not till then."

Hand in hand they sauntered down to the beach and almost wordlessly they stripped off their clothes and went running into the gentle surf, even their voices quiet in this loveliest of all nights. They splashed about, played games, then did their best to wash all signs of their trip from their bodies, even from their hair. Finally they emerged, looking like young pale seals.

They dressed once more in their outlandish clothes—their beads and their sandals, their jeans and their bright-colored shirts—and the boy's long golden hair and beard gleamed in the moonlight and the girl's

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darker hair tumbled to her shoulders and down her back and around her lovely young face. "Let's sleep," she said drowsily. "I love you, Kerry."

"Let's," he said, "and no one else in the world even knows what love is."

"What is it?" she murmured, already half gone in slumber.

"Freedom," he said. And kissed her. On the nose. "No one can take our love from us now." And almost instantly, beside her, he was asleep.

Then suddenly he was awake and aware.

He heard Jan beside him, felt her struggling, knew that the sound was that of terror, felt the same terror himself as he was caught around the throat; but his frame was powerful and he threw off his assailant, calling out to Jan, "Run! Run!" and now found himself fighting two antagonists.

There were low sounds, laughs, mutterings, then silence, and still he thrashed in the dark, fighting both of them, calling to Jan (where was she? where was she?) to run.

"*Run!*" he shouted again, knowing instinctively that he was not the one they were after, knowing that whoever they were they were too stoned to know what they were doing. He could smell the foul sweetness on their breaths, worse than that of animals who had tasted blood; he had one assailant by the throat, was fending off the other, when there was a sharp blow to the back of his neck and then darkness . . .

He didn't know how long he'd been out or, at first, where he was or what had happened. It came back to him in sudden flashes at first—darkness, then fighting, darkness, then struggle and muttering and no sound from Jan— Jan! Where was she?

He pushed himself to his feet, his head shattering all the nerves in his body, and looked around. There were terrible marks in the sand—deep gullies and a whirlpool of sand that had been built up by the desperate struggle. But no sign of Jan, no sign of the assailants.

He stood an instant, clearing his head, and then ran up to the roadside, calling "Jan! Jan!" There was no sound in the night, except the one he was making. And something else was wrong—his Honda was gone.

Had Jan taken it? Had she got away while he was fighting them, run up here, and escaped on the Honda? But she didn't know how to drive it. Wouldn't she try anyway, in her panic to get away?

There was no one. Nothing.

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The night was growing moonless and the light from the stars was feeble. But he must find her. Could she be somewhere in the underbrush, hiding? His mind was still muggy. He started to walk, to run, toward the town, but only a few steps farther on he saw the great stone house looming up against the blackness of night. There was a light in a downstairs window and he started toward it, running swiftly, to call the police, to call anyone, to find Jan, to know what had happened to her, where she was, how he could find her.

He ran quickly, soundlessly up the steps in his thonged sandals and rang the bell, and then, too impatient to wait, he started to pound on the door. "Let me in!" he cried. "Let me in!"

The door did not open. But a small window at eye level did, and he could see the face inside, the face of a handsome woman with blonde hair piled on top of her head, her thirty-year-old features distorted with anger.

"Get away from here!" she shouted. "What do you mean pounding on my door at this hour of the night!"

"Something's happened," he said, gasping. "My girl's gone. Two guys attacked us. I have to get in and use your phone to call the police—"

"Oh, it's the police now that you need them," said the woman with a short laugh. "It's always the fuzz or pigs when they're after you. No, you can't come in. You hippies are all the same, two of you now, banging on the door in the middle of the night—"

"Two of us?" he said, with sudden hope. "When? A girl? Tonight?"

"Yes, she came banging on the door, just like you, yelling to get in, that two men were after her. Let her in, she said. Any time! I'm on to the way you hippies worm your way into a decent person's house—"

"You didn't let her in?" said the youth incredulously. "Those two men attacked us—she got away—and you didn't let her in?"

"No, not her and not you and not any more of you bums. Going around with your beards and your dirty hair trying to break into other people's houses—"

The little window closed and while he stood there the light went off inside and the night was still and dark again.

At last Kerry found her—in the small hospital of the town. They let him in to see her—he was alert enough to tell them he was her husband—and he found her lying in bed with her eyes

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closed and her face battered and tubes going into her everywhere.

He sat beside her and took one of her hands in his and after a long while she opened her eyes, saw him, and tried to smile; but the tears kept welling in her eyes.

"I ran," she whispered. "While they were fighting you."

She stopped and he leaned over and said, "I'm here now, Jan. You don't have to talk. Wait till you're better."

She closed her eyes and he wondered if she were sleeping, or unconscious. Then she opened them again. "I got away," she whispered, her words coming with difficulty. "I ran. I got up to—to that big house and rang and rang and—and the woman wouldn't let me in. She—she called me names."

Her eyes closed again and the young man sat beside her, holding her cooling hand in his and hating. The stoned animals who had done this to Jan he could manage some time to forget. The woman who had denied her safety, he could not. When there was a traffic accident, he recalled, the person last able to avoid it, regardless of right of way, was the one held responsible. The woman in the stone house by the beach could have saved Jan; she didn't. The animals would receive their punishment—the police were out looking for them now; but the woman in the stone house would go scot-free.

He sat beside his girl's bed all the rest of the night, feeling himself fill with resentment and then hatred, and then a need to punish, to retaliate, in order to rid himself of the violent emotions that until now had been completely foreign to him. If anything happened to Jan—he came out of his dark imaginings and found that the small hand in his was cold.

Two police officers came into the hospital room.

"How is she, son?" one of them asked.

"She's dead," said the boy.

The officers were sympathetic. "We'll have to talk to you later about this," said the older one, a hand on the young man's shoulder. "Just wanted to let you know that we just brought in the two punks that attacked you. They crashed your Honda—one dead, the other soon will be. Both stoned to the eyeballs. Keep in touch with us."

"I will," said the boy, knowing the police would never see him again, and walked out past the doctor and nurses now busy in Jan's room. He went down the steps of the small

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hospital and into a park nearby and he pushed Jan out of his mind, and everything else in life except the woman in the stone house. She was the one who killed Jan. The punks had got theirs; the woman must get hers.

He sat in the park all night, thinking of ways and means and nurturing his hatred. His grief was frozen within him, never to be released.

The sky lightened, and he got up and started walking back toward the stone house, carefully averting his eyes from the beach below where he and Jan had lain. He skulked, he went behind trees when a car passed, but as his plan blossomed in his mind he reversed his procedure: let everyone see him, let witnesses come forward to say they had seen the beaded, bearded hippie on the road, going toward the stone house.

There was quiet around the house; he wondered if a man also lived there. No, a man would have come to the door last night. Perhaps a man would have let Jan in . . . There was something else he needed to know. A mail box stood down by the road that went past the stone house and on it were the words Mrs. Rhoda Henshaw, Widow or divorcée. Good. All he had to do was to get in. Not break in. Get in. By her own invitation.

He turned back and started toward town again, trudging along trying to look bright and wholesome. On the outskirts of town he found a motel and stopped in the office to inquire about a room. The ancient manager looked him over suspiciously. "Luggage?" he said. "Car?"

"No," said the boy "But I have money."

He did indeed. Money left over from his job as a tutor for rich kids up north. Money for him and Jan to laze away the summer on, before they settled down to marriage and another job in the winter while he finished his last year of college. Money that was worthless to him now.

He took out a bill and the manager accepted it, offering no change. The boy took the key that was handed him and said, "I'm meeting my brother here. Okay?" The manager shrugged and turned away.

He walked into town and found a men's clothing store. Carefully he selected the right clothes: gray suit, the most expensive one in the place; soft white shirt; blue tie of the best quality; socks; loafers. He paid for them and moved on to a variety store, where he bought himself a razor, toilet articles,

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an attaché case. Again he moved on, this time to a hardware store where, casually, he bought some scissors and the sharpest small knife he could find. "Wife going nuts," he told the salesman, "trying to peel potatoes with what we got."

He went back to the motel room and lay down on the bed to sleep. Jan was not allowed to enter his mind. There was room for only one woman there now.

He slept. He woke in late afternoon and rose and shaved, a close shave with lotion patted on afterward. With the scissors he cut his hair as short as he could but it still looked jagged and home-clipped. Then he stepped into a hot tub, soaked the bruises and pains out of his body, dried himself thoroughly, and put on his new clothes.

He looked in the mirror and hated what he saw. He hated the short golden hair, the blue eyes and the even features. He had the born beauty that had made his mother put him in the movies when he was a child, and try to keep him there later without success. He hated his outward appearance that had opened doors for him and attracted swarms of young girls and too many older women who did not understand him at all but could not resist what he appeared to be. He hated himself in these fine clothes.

All the better, he thought grimly, and left the motel—in the guise of his own brother, if the manager happened to be noticing—and walked to the town again where he had his hair cut shorter and trimmed evenly.

Dusk was crowding the daylight when he finally started to walk again. He kept to the side of the road, the attaché case in hand, and arrived at his destination. He paused at the foot of the driveway for his last taste of youth and innocence, and then walked up to the front door and rang the bell.

The small window opened and the same woman, her face hard from sophistication, peered out at him. She looked at the beautiful young man and she smiled.

"Yes?" she said, her eyes inviting.

"Mrs. Henshaw? I hope you'll forgive me for bothering you but the new brokerage house that's planning to open an office here is making a survey—that is, a survey of the prominent citizens hereabouts—and I was given your name. Now if I could just talk to you for a few moments—?"

The smile deepened on her face, the voice purred. "Why, of course," she said. "Do come in"—and she opened wide the door.

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Continuing the series of new stories about Edward Brady, codebuster... "We do not expect a miracle—there is so little to go on"...

THE TELEGRAM CODE

by JOHN ABBOTT

The Captain of the Border Patrol was duly apologetic.

"I regret, Mr. Brady, to interrupt your vacation. However, when I telephoned Washington and requested assistance from the Chief of Intelligence, he informed me that you were visiting California and instructed me to make contact."

Edward Brady swung wide the door to his cabana, indicating a wicker chair. "Please sit down. I'll try my best to help."

"Thank you."

The officer was Jorge Ruiz. For several years he had directed the Customs examination of motorists and vehicles crossing from Mexico into the United States through the border city of San Ysidro. There had been isolated instances of people attempting to enter illegally by hiding under the hoods of rear-motor cars, or in the trunk compartments of others; these stratagems had been easily detected. Now, it was feared, a well-organized plan for smuggling aliens into the country was in operation. Transportation was provided by a fleet of trucks that hauled beans from the fields of Mexico to a warehouse in Los Angeles.

Edward Brady waved a hand to insert a question. "But how can the trucks pass the border check without the aliens being detected?"

"Ah, we do not know."

"Then why do you suspect the trucking company?"

"Because we once *did* discover a man and woman hiding in the rear of one of their trucks, down behind the many bags of beans. The driver claimed that since the vehicle had no lock on the rear doors the couple must have jumped aboard without his knowledge, probably when the truck stopped for a crossroads signal.

"We could not prove otherwise, but I was still suspicious. I alerted the Los Angeles office. They positioned an unmarked

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car on the San Diego Thruway near the exit closest to the warehouse. The car followed the truck off the ramp and the agents reported that before going to the warehouse the driver stopped and made an interesting pickup. At a Western Union office."

Brady was surprised. "A telegram?"

"Yes. Oh, it could have been anything, from his wife or a friend. But after backing the truck into the warehouse unloading dock the driver was seen giving the telegram to the man supervising the unloading. This person, in turn, surrendered the message to a man who came rushing anxiously out of the front office. This man pocketed the telegram, glanced nervously around, then retreated to the office. Our agents returned to the telegraph office and obtained a copy of the message."

Captain Ruiz offered Brady a sheet of notepaper.

Brady read:

CODE: 13
BEN : 42
MARY: 68

Brady looked at his visitor. "This is all?"

The Captain shrugged. "True, it is not much. But we feel it tells something about the man and woman found in the truck. Perhaps it is a code for the pickup location or for a dropoff spot before the border check. We just do not know, Mr. Brady."

"You said you only detected stowaways once. Were there any more telegrams?"

"Oh, yes." Captain Ruiz offered a second sheet that read:

CODE: 17
BEN : 51
MARY: 74

"The pattern is always the same," the Captain explained. "Each time a truck travels north a telegram is sent. We have searched the trucks for hidden compartments without success."

Brady nodded absently. He placed the two messages side by side, then one above the other. He reversed the positions. No inspiration was forthcoming.

Captain Ruiz managed a tight smile.

"We do not expect a miracle, Mr. Brady—there is so little to go on. You have been kind to hear me out. Tomorrow morning I am going to visit the warehouse and ask the manager for his explanation of the telegrams. Of course he will learn of our suspicion but it cannot be helped."

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Brady wriggled uncomfortably. He could not, he knew, resume his leisurely vacation while the riddle of the telegrams taunted him, piqued his curiosity.

"I'm coming with you," he decided.

The sun had failed to appear when they reached the warehouse the next morning. A row of trucks stood mute and empty against the unloading dock. A few workmen sat on the steps that led to the office, unwrapping sandwiches, opening Thermos jugs, swapping jokes. They became silent as Brady and Captain Ruiz drew near. Their eyes followed the two men into the glass enclosure marked: *M. Scott, Chief Dispatcher.*

The man behind the desk merely snorted when Captain Ruiz identified himself. "Look, if it's about those two people that jumped into our truck—"

"No." Captain Ruiz proffered the copies of the telegrams. "We would like to hear your explanation of these."

"Why, sure." If Scott was rattled by the two messages he certainly didn't show it. "You see, when a shipment of beans is ready to come here, the farm boss wires me the labor costs involved so that I can make entries in my expense ledger. To save money on the telegrams we've reduced everything to three pieces of information. The word 'Code' stands for the area—some farms pay more than others, so I have to know the exact point of origin. The figures after 'Ben' and 'Mary' represent the number of hours worked by men and women on that particular shipment. Simple?"

"I'd like to see your expense ledger," Brady requested.

"Then go get a court order," Scott said sharply. "If you can."

Captain Ruiz was about to speak when the office door slammed open. A thin haggard young man stood in the doorway wringing his hands spasmodically. His dark glasses refracted the light from the neon ceiling-fixture.

Scott jumped to his feet. "Get out," he shouted. "Can't you see I'm busy? Get out!"

"Please," the young man begged. "I know the three came in last night. I need"—he glanced apprehensively at Brady and Ruiz—"something."

Scott had rushed from behind his desk. He whirled the man about and propelled him from the office with a brutal shove. Puffing from the exertion Scott returned to his seat and glared at his two visitors.

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"If there are no further questions you will have to excuse me. I've got work to do."

Brady tugged the Captain's sleeve and the two investigators left. During the drive to Brady's hotel it began to rain. Captain Ruiz announced that the weather matched his mood.

Brady wasn't listening. His mind reviewed the confrontation with Scott at the warehouse. Brady had the copies of the telegrams in his hands and as he looked at them the significance of the words came to him first, and then he knew the importance of the numbers.

Grinning, Brady slapped Ruiz on the back.

"I have it," he said.

"Caramba! I have been talking to you for five minutes and you never answered once. Do you mean we can trap the clever Mr. Scott?"

"Yes. Mr. Scott ejected that unfortunate young man much too late. I had heard—and seen—enough to know what to look for in the messages. But here is my hotel. Let's dodge the raindrops, get a drink, and then I'll give you the answer."

Brady sipped and sighed. "Ah-h, it hits the spot. Now, about that young man."

"Did he really spill the beans?" Ruiz asked.

Brady nodded, suppressing a grin. "He certainly did. All last night I tried to break those two coded messages, but I was stymied. They were so brief—each had only three short lines. But we knew they tied in somehow with the deliveries to the warehouse. When that fellow burst into the office and said that the three had arrived, I guessed he was referring to the three coded items that we couldn't decipher. Scott panicked and tried to get him out before he could say anything more."

"Then it is not aliens that Scott is smuggling into the States?"

"No. But he was happy to have you suspect him of that. It distracted you from his true operation and helped to obscure the real meaning of the telegrams."

"How did you finally decode them?"

"By concentrating on that young man. Remember how nervous and debilitated he looked? He said he had a need and he did—for something illegal, something that had to be smuggled over the border. He was almost exploding with tension. He had a need, all right."

Captain Ruiz pummeled his forehead. "Of course. Narcotics!"

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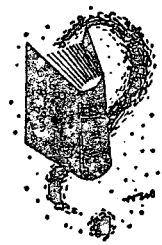
"Right. I noted his dark glasses. Chronic users of certain drugs—benzedrine, for one—become hypersensitive to all light. There was no sunlight today, yet he still wore dark glasses. In some social circles they are called Benny Shades.

"In the car I examined the two telegrams again. The middle entry on each was 'Ben.' Suppose this was used to signify benzedrine. The first entry, 'Code,' could be short for codeine. The third entry, 'Mary,' could stand for marijuana."

"And the numbers?"

"I'd say they informed Mr. Scott which three sacks of beans to hold aside for special handling."



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a *NEW* short-short by

RICHARD MATHESON

"An ultimate array of squares, semisquares, and adverse conjunctions..."

LEO RISING

by RICHARD MATHESON

"Grace?"

She stopped and looked across her shoulder. Miles was standing in the doorway of his study.

"Yes?" she asked.

"I have to speak to you," he told her.

No, she thought. She almost groaned aloud. Not *another* crisis.

"Please," he said. His tone was grim.

"The car's already waiting," she objected.

Miles shuddered. "This is absolutely vital."

Grace sighed and shut the front door. Give me strength, she thought as she crossed the entry hall. Miles stepped aside, admitting her to his study. "I have an awful lot of shopping to do," she said.

"This won't take long."

She cast her eyes upward. Famous last words, she thought; he used them every time—and it always took long.

His astrological chart was on the desk.

"This is *it*," said Miles.

She held herself in check. "What's wrong?" she asked. *This* time? she kept herself from adding.

"An ultimate array of squares, semisquares, and adverse conjunctions," Miles answered in a quavering voice.

Don't sigh wearily, she told herself firmly. "What does it mean?" she asked, adopting a solicitous tone.

"Financial ruin."

She blinked. Did he say ruin? "Ruin?"

"Ruin."

Grace's mouth opened and closed without a sound. This was serious. With his fanatical devotion to astrology he might very well create that ruin just to

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prove his point. She stared at him in shock. All the aggravations of the past seemed trivial compared to this.

"See here," he said. He drew her to the desk and pointed at his chart with stabbing motions. "Square to Mars. Square to Saturn. Adverse conjunction. Semisquare to Mercury. Good God, it's a positive blueprint for bankruptcy!"

No, she thought. She could not repress a groan this time. And there was nothing she could do; that was the nightmare. In every other detail of their marriage Miles deferred to her completely. But where astrology was concerned—

"What are you going to do?" she murmured.

"It's already done," he answered. His voice made her shiver.

Incredible, she thought ten minutes later as she rode into the city. All these years of being convinced that astrology was nonsense. Now this. It certainly gave one a sense of cosmic awe.

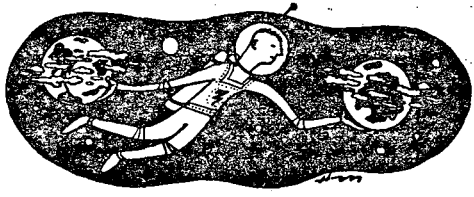
"Where to?" the chauffeur asked.

Grace blinked and looked at him. "The bank," she said. She had to smile. *Your chart is free of such afflictions, don't you see,* Miles had told her dramatically; *therefore, to protect myself from this impending ruin I must transfer everything to you.*

"And then?" the chauffeur broke into her train of thought.

The sight of his shoulders and curly black hair made her tingle with anticipation.

"And then the airport," she replied, "Leo, darling."



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"Everyone would be most sympathetic. No one would suspect a thing"...

LOT 721/XY258

by R. L. STEVENS

It takes more than hatred to make a murderer.

William Willis had hated his wife almost from the day of their marriage 17 years ago, but the thought of murder had never once crossed his mind. He was quite content to live out the days of his life without complaint, driving to the office each morning, returning each evening, and simply shutting his ears to the constant drone of her voice.

In her late thirties, Constance Willis had lost almost all the youthful beauty that had first attracted Willis to her in college. She was flabby of body and mind, hardly ever bothering to read a newspaper or pick up a book. Her days were spent in random shopping excursions with girl friends, at a weekly bridge club and in countless hours on the telephone. But for all his hatred, William Willis had never thought of murder. In fact, he did not even think of divorce until he met Rita Morgan in the apartment downstairs.

Willis and his wife had no children, so they'd remained for many years in the pleasant garden apartment close to the downtown expressway. It was convenient to his office, and the surroundings had taken on the comfortable feeling of home. The apartment was one of the few things in their marriage that William and Constance agreed on.

When Rita Morgan moved into the apartment below them, Willis' evenings and weekends immediately perked up. Rita was a 25-year-old schoolteacher with long blonde hair and the sort of quiet beauty that couldn't have passed unnoticed even among her fifth-grade pupils. Willis helped her move in, carrying a few cartons of books up from her car, and they became friends immediately. She was everything he'd seen in Constance 17 years before. But more important, she was intelligent and witty.

"Were you down in Rita's apartment again?" Constance asked one Saturday afternoon.

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"One of her faucets was leaking," he explained. "It only needed a new washer."

"There's a janitor to take care of those things."

He sighed and opened a beer for himself. "You know she'd have to wait a month before he'd get around to it."

Constance grunted, but he knew she was unhappy about his attentions to Rita Morgan. She need not have worried quite so much, for Rita was a virginal young lady—at least as far as Willis was concerned—who treated him only with neighborly good will.

Nevertheless, it was Rita's presence on the scene that came first to Willis' mind when he read in the afternoon paper about the food contamination. A twelve-year-old boy had died of botulism in Chicago after eating canned peaches that had been improperly sterilized. As a rule, peaches were rarely affected by botulism, but these had been processed in a special manner, making them more susceptible to the deadly spores.

Reflecting on the blind fate that had killed the boy, he could not help speculating on a similar fate befalling Constance. Driving home that night, his recent daydreams of divorce and marriage to Rita shifted focus. Now he imagined Constance dead, killed by some trick of fate like an auto accident or contaminated food.

Constance did not mention the news of the botulism scare and it passed from his mind for the night. She kept up so little on current events that he'd often had to explain at length some happening on the foreign scene or some new face on the political horizon. Her interest in events, and in people other than her own circle of friends, had virtually ceased the day she left college to marry Willis.

But he was reminded again of the canned peaches when one of the secretaries at the office mentioned it. The afternoon paper had further details, including word that all of one lot was being recalled by the canner. Can o' Gold Fancy Prepared Peaches, lot 721/XY258.

Then the daydreams returned. He knew Constance ate canned peaches during the summer, often having them as part of her dessert. And he knew that she sometimes bought the Can o' Gold brand.

He pored over the newspapers that afternoon, even walking three blocks to a store where he knew he could buy a Chicago paper. He read more about the boy's death, and about the deadly effects of botulism poisoning, and the

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fantasy continued to grow in his mind. By the evening paper all Can o' Gold fruit products were being recalled, and consumers were being warned to avoid lot 721/XY258.

That evening at home, while Constance chatted on the telephone with some friend, William Willis glanced over the cupboard shelves, inspecting the canned goods. There were two cans of peaches, and one of them was Can o' Gold. His heart skipped a beat as he peered in at the lot number embossed on the lid. It was lot 721/XY258. Studying it more closely, he noticed that the can was bulging a trifle—an almost certain sign of gases produced by the bacterial activity inside.

There, standing on a shelf in the cupboard, was one of the deadly cans of peaches.

He said nothing to Constance, but that night in bed the possibilities paraded through his mind. All he had to do was say nothing, and sooner or later Constance would eat the contaminated peaches and die of botulism. Everyone would be most sympathetic. No one would suspect a thing.

And William Willis would be a free man.

He rolled over on his side and gazed into the darkness, thinking of Rita Morgan downstairs.

On his way out in the morning he saw Rita washing her car with a hose. "Hello, there," he called out. "I didn't think teachers ever got up this early in the summertime."

"I'm going on a picnic," she answered, beaming a smile his way. "Trying to get some of the dirt off this thing first."

"If I didn't have to go to work, I'd help you out." He stood chatting with her for another few moments, until he noticed Constance watching them from an upstairs window. "Gotta be going," he said finally. "Be seeing you."

That day in the office he tried not to think about it. But after lunch, while reading the latest newspaper account of the can recall, he let the idea of murder cross his mind.

If Constance died from eating those peaches, was he guilty of murder?

No, no—he refused to accept that. He had not even touched the can. Constance had purchased it, Constance would open it, Constance would eat it—possibly during the day when he wasn't even at home. How could it be his fault?

Accident. Or death by misadventure, as the British liked to say. But certainly not murder.

William Willis went back to work and tried not to think of

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the can of peaches waiting on the shelf for Constance.

When he got home that evening the first sight that greeted him was Constance sitting at the kitchen table eating peaches and ice cream.

"Won't that spoil your dinner, dear?" he asked a bit stiffly.

"It's too hot to cook dinner in the apartment. I thought we might just go out for a sandwich later. All right?"

On any other night he might have grumbled, but this evening he simply said, "Sure," and walked behind her back to the cupboard. The Can o' Gold Peaches were still on the shelf. She was eating the other brand.

They talked very little that night and for the first time in many years he found himself getting through the hours with Constance without feeling the old hatred. When they returned from dinner, Rita came upstairs to borrow some milk, and Constance greeted her in a friendly fashion and even invited her in for coffee. Willis went to bed that night feeling good.

The feeling persisted the next day at the office and he wondered if he might be mellowing toward Constance. He made a point of buying the New York and Chicago newspapers, where the story of the botulism scare was still very much alive on the inner pages. One paper carried a detailed account of the boy's death agonies, of the gradual impairment of various parts of his brain until finally he simply stopped breathing. Willis read it grim-lipped, imagining Constance as she might be during those long hours of dying.

He grabbed the telephone and dialed his home number, but the line was busy. She was chatting with a girl friend again.

His hands were trembling when he put down the phone and he knew he must get a grip on himself. He'd been only an instant from warning her, from telling her of the contaminated can and thereby revealing the dark presumptions that had run through his mind. He must control himself. He was not a murderer. He was not even an instrument of chance.

And yet—if Constance died would he ever be able to look at himself in a mirror again? Would he ever be able to love Rita Morgan without the memory of Constance's death to haunt them?

He picked up the phone and dialed his number again. The line was still busy.

"I have to go home," he told his secretary. "Emergency."

He got the car out of the lot

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and headed for the expressway. It was nearly midafternoon and he knew she sometimes had her peaches about this time of the day. The drive home seemed longer than it had ever been at rush hours. Driving fast, almost recklessly, he imagined finding her stretched out dead on the kitchen floor—even though he knew from the newspaper articles that botulism took several hours to show its first symptoms.

He turned into the drive next to the apartment house and parked in his usual spot. The second-floor window of his apartment seemed the same, the place itself seemed unchanged. Perhaps he'd made the drive for nothing, and he'd have to explain it to Constance. And somehow get that can out of the house.

"Dear! I'm home early!"

There was no answer and he went into the kitchen seeking her. The first thing he saw was the open, empty, discarded can of Can o' Gold Fancy Prepared Peaches by the sink. That, and an empty dish, with its dirty spoon and telltale juices.

"*Constance!*"

She appeared then, coming from the bathroom. Her face was pale and somehow a little strange. "What are you doing home?" she asked.

"I wasn't feeling well."

"Oh."

"Constance, did you eat those peaches?"

She glanced at the empty dish and the discarded can by the sink. Then her eyes met his and there was something in them he'd never seen before.

"Oh, no, dear. That nice Miss Morgan came up to borrow something, and she stayed and chatted, and I persuaded her to have a little snack."

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a detective *SHORT NOVEL* by

ROBERT B. SINCLAIR

complete in this issue

A quiet short novel of crime and detection — no fireworks, no sensationalism, not even any brilliant deductions — although it has its full share of the irony that occurs so often in real life. All the reader-reports on this short novel consistently referred to the quietly realistic impact of this murder and its investigation, with the emphasis not on procedural techniques but on documentary credibility. The story is told in a forthright, implacable style that seizes the reader's interest and holds it fast, with mounting tension, until the last sentence; and you're not likely to forget quickly the different levels of meanings in the "snare of perfumed velvet and satin and rose petals" — a trap that the police (especially Sergeant Bauer) would hardly describe in those words...

A quietly diabolical short novel complete in this issue...

ALL ACCORDING TO PLAN

by ROBERT B. SINCLAIR

The police car stopped before the small two-story house, and the plainclothesman in the front seat got out, walked up on the porch, and rang the bell. The door was opened by a man in his early thirties, coatless and tieless.

"Mr. Arthur Conway?" The other nodded. "My name's Larkin. Homicide Bureau. Mind if I come in?"

Conway opened the door wider and stepped aside. "What is it?" he said.

"Sit down, Mr. Conway," the detective said. "I'm afraid I've got bad news for you."

"You've found her?"

"We've found your car."

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"But Helen—Mrs. Conway—?"

"This is going to be a shock, Mr. Conway. There was a body in the car, and I'm afraid it's your wife's. I'd like you to come down with me now to identify her—if it is her."

"What happened?" Conway asked.

Larkin hesitated and looked at the floor.

"Tell me," Conway insisted.

"Found the car a little over an hour ago. Then they discovered her, on the floor, covered with a coat. She'd been strangled." The detective seemed to have finished.

"But what else? I mean, how did it happen? And when? You must know something!"

"Not yet," the detective said.

"I'll get a tie and my coat," Conway said. "I'll be right down."

After a mercifully brief session at the Morgue they drove to the Homicide Bureau where, in the office of Captain Ramsden, a group of officers and detectives was already assembled. Ramsden, Chief of the Bureau, looked at two official-looking forms which lay on his desk.

"You reported that your wife disappeared, along with your car, last night, Mr. Conway," he said. "Will you tell us exactly what happened?"

"I'll tell you everything I can, which isn't much," Conway said. "We went to a movie, the Monterey Theater out on Santa Monica Boulevard. We left after the picture, around nine thirty, I guess, and walked back to the car. We weren't in the regular parking lot next to the theater, we were in one across the street, a couple of hundred feet down the block. There was no attendant there, so it was an easy way to save a quarter, and we always parked there when we went to the movies. Well, when we got to the car my wife discovered she'd lost a glove, so I went back to the theater to look for it. The manager got a flashlight and we found it under the seat. I went back to the parking lot, and my wife and the car were gone."

"How long was it from the time you left her until you got back?"

"It seemed no time at all—certainly not over ten minutes."

"Did your wife drive?"

"She didn't like to, and never did if she could avoid it. That's why I was so alarmed and telephoned for a radio car. But I don't think the officers took me seriously. They thought it was another case like

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that woman who drove off to a motel with an eighteen-year-old boy while her husband was doing the marketing."

"They took it seriously enough to prowl the neighborhood, looking for the car. There was no trace of it."

A youngish man entered, carrying a brilliant orange scarf. "Just got your message, Captain," he said. "I've been talking to people in the block where the car was parked. Here's the scarf."

"This is Mr. Conway, Sergeant Bauer," Ramsden said, taking the scarf. "Do you recognize this, Mr. Conway?"

Conway nodded. "She was wearing it last night," he said.

Bauer took out a notebook, sat down at the side of the captain's desk, and the interrogation proceeded. Conway gave an account of his own and his wife's movements for several days before the tragedy; he enumerated their few friends and acquaintances; he knew of no enemies. They had been married four years, and their life together had been completely happy. Conway was a writer; they had come to Los Angeles from New York a year ago, with the idea he might do some work in movies, but nothing had come of it, so he had continued doing magazine fiction.

After a little over an hour Ramsden rose from his desk, and the interview seemed to be over.

"Can't you tell *me* anything, Captain?" Conway asked. "Any clues? Any suspects? It won't bring her back, I know, but I'd hate to see whoever did this get away with it."

"It's too soon to have anything much. The car was found over on Fulton Street, about three miles from the theater. One of our squad cars recognized the license as being on the stolen-car list; then they found the body, strangled with this scarf. It's the third of these strangling murders in six weeks." Ramsden turned to Bauer. "What were you able to find out over there?"

"Not much. A girl, er"—the sergeant referred to his notebook—"Elsie Daniels, was sitting on her front porch last night with her boy friend, Fred Bissell, when the car was parked. They'd been listening to some music on the radio, and then Senator Graham came on. They took a couple of minutes of that, and then she switched over to another station. She came back out on the porch and just barely sat down when they heard the noise of a fender scrapin against the curb and saw the ca parking. Then the guy—"

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"Wait a minute," Ramsden interrupted. "Senator Graham was on at ten o'clock last night. I listened to him myself."

"I didn't have time to check it yet," Bauer said.

"That's when it was," Ramsden said. "Somebody introduced him—short introduction, no more than a minute—and then he started speaking. So if she says they listened for a couple of minutes—well, it must have been between ten two and, say, ten five."

"You mean it happened within a half hour after I left her?" Conway said incredulously.

"Looks like it," Ramsden said.

"It's not unusual in this kind of a case," Bauer said. "Anyhow, the guy got out of the car and just walked off."

"Any description?" Ramsden asked.

"Well, for once it's not that medium-size guy in a dark suit. He had a dark suit, all right, but at least we got a little something to go on. She says he was stoop-shouldered, almost hunchbacked."

Conway was conscious that every pair of eyes in the room had been turned on him as Bauer spoke.

"That's more than we usually get on one of these cases," Ramsden said. Conway realized that the remark was addressed to him, and in a more friendly tone than Ramsden had used previously. "We've got a good man on this case, Mr. Conway." He indicated the sergeant. "Sergeant Lester R. Bauer. The R. stands for Right." He chuckled, and Conway's face betrayed the fact that he did not get the joke. "'Right' Bauer," the captain explained patiently. "You'll understand if you get to see much of him."

Bauer obviously was not amused.

"May as well get the fingerprints now," Ramsden continued. "And the reporters are waiting. Make it as short as you can, Sergeant. Then go out to the parking lot and go over the ground with Mr. Conway."

Conway was interviewed and photographed, and in almost no time, thanks to Bauer, they were on their way to the car which was waiting, with Larkin at the wheel.

"Wise guy," the sergeant murmured, as he got into the back seat with Conway.

"How's that?" Conway asked.

"That comic captain. With his jokes."

"What did he mean—'The R. stands for Right'?"

"Some of the boys started calling me that because I'm

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practically always right about everything." He said it as a simple statement of fact. "Only, he thinks it's funny or something."

For the first time Conway looked carefully at the young man whose unimpressive façade concealed this rather staggering ego. He had a chin and forehead which receded almost equally; his cheeks were full and his nose broad and flat so that, from a three-quarter angle, his face looked rather like the blunt end of an egg. His pale eyes reflected placidity and self-satisfaction to an unusual degree. Conway decided that this was no man to bring terror to the hearts of evildoers.

When they reached the theater they drove past it and into the parking lot. Bauer had the police car parked in the space Conway had used; the lot ran through to an alley in the rear, and Conway had been in the last space, next to the alley. The three walked back to the theater where the manager was waiting for them.

"What I want to do," the detective said, "is figure out, as close as I can, the time the car was taken. You said you left at the end of the picture—right?"

"No, we left a little before the end." Conway turned to the manager. "We left right after that musical number, when Tommy Miller goes backstage and says something about 'How could I ever have doubted you?' "

"That's practically the finish," the manager corroborated. "There's not more than a minute after that."

"What time was the picture over?" Bauer asked.

The manager referred to his time sheet. "Last night the feature finished at nine twenty-eight exactly."

"I guess we'll have to do what they call re-enact the crime," Bauer said. "You do just exactly what you did from the time you left the theater and try to take the same amount of time doing it, so we can see where we're at."

The detective clicked a stop watch and Conway set off for the parking lot, Bauer trailing behind him. When they reached the police car Conway went through the motions of unlocking the door and helping his wife in.

"I asked her to slam the door, and she did," he said. "I got her coat off the back seat and she put it around her shoulders. I started the motor and was about to back out when she discovered she couldn't find her other glove. She looked for it for a couple of minutes, and then she asked me if I'd go back to the theater,

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because she was sure she'd lost it there, and if there was anything in the world she hated it was losing one glove and having the other around to remind her of it. So I cut the motor, left the keys in the switch, and started back."

"Just a minute." Bauer clicked his stop watch. "Time out. What about other people here? Did you notice?"

"I didn't see anybody when we got here. I think we were the first ones. By the time I started back to the theater there were people here. A couple of cars drove out ahead of me as I was walking back to the street."

Bauer finished writing in his notebook. "Okay, let's go on from here."

Conway faithfully duplicated his actions of the previous night. He stopped, as he had then, to explain his wife's loss to the doorman who had re-admitted him to the theater. He searched unsuccessfully in the dark, and then he and the manager did an approximation of their conversation and search, culminating in the finding of the glove and his return to the parking lot.

"You left her for exactly ten minutes and forty seconds," Bauer announced. "What'd you do then?"

Conway related the confused movements of a man bewildered by an utterly unexpected event: his return to the theater, scanning the cars parked along the curb, another search of the parking lot and of the alley behind it, and inquiries at the drug store on the corner.

"We were early when we got to the theater, and my wife hated to come in on the finish of a picture, so we'd gone across to the drug store for a cup of coffee. She was wearing that bright orange scarf, and I thought if she'd been in there, she might have been noticed. But she hadn't been. Then I called and asked them to send a squad car around."

"But you didn't make a formal complaint then."

"They seemed to think I was all excited about nothing, and I wanted to think so. They said they'd search the neighborhood, and I looked around some more, and then called home. There was no answer, of course, and while I was thinking what to do next, a bus came along. I hopped on it, rode down to Hollywood police station, and reported the disappearance."

Bauer had been making notes during this recital; now he put the notebook in his pocket and led the way to the car. "Nothing else to do here," he said. "I'll drop you home."

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"I appreciate the lift," Conway said as they drove away. "When you're used to a car out here, you're lost without it. I don't even know how to get around. Why, after the—last night, after it happened, when I got on that bus, the trip took forever. Then, when we got there, I didn't even see Wilcox Avenue till we were going across it, so I had to ride an extra block. That was the last straw."

The detective made no comment on this somewhat less than vital revelation, and Conway became aware that the sergeant was preoccupied with his own problems.

Conway entered the empty house and stood in the hall for several minutes, feeling very empty, himself. But he needed to be doing, not thinking, and he remembered one duty which had to be performed. He sat down and composed a wire to Betty, Helen's half sister. The two had not communicated for almost four years; their mother's death had precipitated a feud over the estate, and they had been bitter enemies ever since. But as she was Helen's only living relative the amenities had to be observed.

At least, it was something to do.

He telephoned the wire and then walked to a newsstand and got the evening papers. The story was all over page one, under gigantic headlines, and there appeared to be no question, in the opinion of the press, that the murder was the work of a maniac. Far down in one of the stories he read:

"Captain Ramsden stated that Arthur Conway, husband of the victim, is not under suspicion and therefore is not being held, although police are checking his story."

Conway went into the kitchen and made a drink.

Bauer sent a car in the morning to bring Conway to the lineup to look over the suspects who had been picked up overnight, but the detective was not surprised when, at the end, Conway had recognized no one he had ever seen before.

"While I think of it," the detective said as they walked toward the police car, "you and your wife must of known more people than the ones you told us yesterday. Naturally, at a time like that, you wouldn't think of all of 'em."

"As a matter of fact, I think I did. We'd met very few people since we came out here."

"I was wondering," Bauer said. "Didn't your wife have an address book, or a list of phone numbers, or something like that?"

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"No—yes, she did. She bought an address book when we first came out here. I don't know whether I can find it. I haven't seen it for months."

"I'll come out and we'll take a look. Have to go out that way anyhow."

When they reached the house Bauer headed directly for the stairs. "Let's try your wife's bedroom first," he said.

In the tiny upstairs hall the detective stopped. "Another thing," he said. "While I think of it, have you got that glove you went back to the theater to find?"

"Yes, I think so. Why?"

"I'd like to take a gander at it."

Conway went into his room, found the glove in a drawer of his desk, and handed it to the detective, who walked to the window as he carefully examined it; then he took from his pocket the mate to it and compared them. "Doesn't make sense," he announced finally.

"What doesn't?"

"Look here." He held the gloves out for Conway's inspection. "They've both been darned a couple of times. There's a rip in this one, and the ends of the fingers are worn through two places in this one and one in that. They're no good."

"I don't see what you're getting at," Conway said.

"It doesn't make sense, that's all. Why would a woman make you go all the way back to that theater to get a glove that was all worn out anyway?"

"I don't know. Except that there's nothing that annoys a woman more than losing one glove."

"Yeah," Bauer conceded. "Sometimes women are tough for even me to figure out. Well, let's see if we can find that address book." He pocketed both gloves and led the way to Helen's room.

Bauer headed straight for the dresser, opened the top drawer, pawed around for a moment, and came up with a small red imitation-leather address book. "See?" he said. "That's what I mean about practically always being right."

Conway maintained a discreet silence.

Bauer started to thumb through the book. "Who's this?" he asked.

Conway looked at the open page. "Oh," he said. "The Gordons. They were our best friends, the only really close friends we had out here. They went back to New York about three months ago."

"That must be why she crossed out the address and phone number," the sergeant observed.

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Conway mentally applauded this brilliant bit of deduction, but said only, "I suppose so."

Bauer continued leafing through the book, which consisted mostly of blank pages. "Didn't know very many people, did you? Must of been kind of lonesome for you."

"Not particularly," Conway said. "Of course, we've missed the Gordons, but my wife and I were perfectly happy just by ourselves."

"Who's he?" Bauer pointed at a name which, though heavily crossed out, was still readable.

"Harry Taylor?" It was several moments before Conway was able to identify the name. "We hardly knew him. We met him once when we had dinner with the Gordons. That must have been six months ago."

Bauer looked at the entry more closely. "The Hillside number was crossed out first," he announced. "See?—the hard pencil? Then the Hempstead number was crossed out the same time she crossed out the name."

"I don't know why it was there in the first place," Conway said.

"Well, makes no difference. Mind if I take this? I prob'ly ought to check with some of these people."

"Go ahead."

"I'll be getting along." The detective turned to the dresser to shut the drawer, but his eyes lingered for a perceptible moment on the contents inside; then, slowly, he closed it as the shrill clamor of the doorbell came from downstairs.

"Would you do me a favor?" Conway asked. "See who it is and try to get rid of them? I don't feel like talking to anybody right now."

"Sure."

"I'll wait up here. Call me when they're gone."

The detective left the room and Conway opened the drawer, trying to discover what had aroused the detective's interest. There was the usual clutter of a woman's catch-all drawer: a couple of handbags, scarves, handkerchiefs, a few letters, a bank statement. He could see nothing which could have any connection with his wife's murder.

Bauer's voice, from downstairs, interrupted him. "Come down here, will you, Mr. Conway?"

As he reached the head of the stairs he saw Bauer holding the front door open. A girl, carrying a suitcase and an overnight bag, came in. "Thank you," she said frigidly to the detective. Then she looked up and saw Conway descending.

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She put down the bags and smiled up at him. "Hello, Arthur," she said.

Bauer looked at Conway, and Conway looked from the girl to the detective and back again. He had never seen her before in his life. What kind of trick is this? he wondered to himself.

"Don't recognize me, do you?" she said.

He shook his head, completely bewildered.

"I'm Betty."

It was a moment before the name registered. "Helen's sister?" he finally said.

"Half sister."

"You didn't tell me she had a sister," Bauer said.

"Half sister," Betty corrected. "And I must say you haven't been very polite."

Conway began to recover from the shock produced by the announcement of her identity. "This is Detective Sergeant Bauer," he said.

She gave Bauer the briefest of looks.

"Surprised to see me?" she said, with another smile at Conway.

"Yes—yes, I am. How did you get here? I wired you only last night."

"I'd left by then. I heard about it on the radio, and then the Topeka paper called me up, and I thought—well, that I ought to hurry out here in case there was anything I could do. So I caught a plane last night, and just got here."

"Please come in." Conway led the way to the living room, trying to puzzle out the sudden appearance of this girl who had not seen Helen for over five years, who had not communicated with her in almost four.

Bauer planted himself in front of Conway. "You never told me she had a sister," he said again.

"Well, I—"

"Half sister," Betty repeated. "He probably forgot I existed. I haven't seen Helen for years, and we never wrote, and, in fact, we weren't on very good terms ever since Mama died and left everything to me because Helen wouldn't stay home, but went to New York. Not that there was very much."

"Why'd you come here if you weren't on very good terms with her?" Bauer asked. "Have you any information you think might help us?"

"Good heavens, no." She looked at Conway. "I just came out because I thought I might be able to help Arthur through this dreadful tragedy."

It was plain that Bauer was suspicious of something; it was equally clear that he was not quite sure of what. "Then you two are pretty good friends?"

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"No, Sergeant, I—" Conway began.

"I hope we will be," Betty said. "But I'd never laid eyes on him until I just walked in the door." Bauer eyed Conway, uncertain of what to believe. "And now, Sergeant, tell me what progress you've made on the case."

She's been seeing too many movies, Conway thought.

The detective glared at her. "No comment," he said.

"I read the papers coming in from the airport," she said. "Why do they say it's a maniac?"

"One reason is because it's the third one of these cases in the last six weeks," the detective said. "I've got to go. Where will you be if I want to get hold of you?"

"I'll be right here, naturally."

Conway's jaw dropped and the detective's eyes widened. "Here?" he said.

"After all, the reason I came out was to help Arthur through this awful thing," she said.

"But you can't stay here with me," Conway said.

"Well, we can talk about it later. You'll let me stay long enough to have a bath and change my clothes, won't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Then I'll do that right now, if the sergeant will excuse me. Would you mind bringing the luggage up and showing me which room you want me to use?" She started up the stairs and Conway felt the detective eyeing him.

"I'll drop in the next time I'm in the neighborhood," Bauer said, and there was something in the tone that chilled Conway. He closed the door after the sergeant and walked slowly up the stairs with Betty's bags.

He found her already in Helen's room.

"I'm dying to talk to you," she said. "And you must want to ask me a lot of things. But do you mind waiting till after I've bathed and changed? I'll feel so much better then." She took the overnight case out of his hand, and smiled at him. "We've so much to catch up on."

"I'll put some towels in the bathroom," he said, and went out and closed the door.

Downstairs, he searched for the reason for her being here. Why had she come? There was, of course, one possible reason which was almost too frightening to contemplate: that Helen had written her recently. What Helen might have said that had roused her suspicions, he could not imagine.

Helen certainly had no

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inkling of the fate in store for her. But, he thought, that was not essential, because almost anything Helen would have said in a recent letter would be enough to give the lie to the story of their relationship he had already told the police. Their violent quarrels, the openly acknowledged hatred, Helen's demands for a divorce, and the money to go with it. His own failures at writing for the past year; her withdrawal of all the money in their bank account, and her taunts at his sudden dependence on her.

Her most recent scheme had been that he write begging letters to his friends in the East, in order to provide her with a settlement. She had given him a list of names and an ultimatum: either he write the letters within twenty-four hours or she would. She had gloated over his humiliation and his helplessness. That was what had done it, what had caused him to realize the depths of the evil in her, and to decide that not only was her death justified, but that her destruction was really an act of self-defense.

Conway began to realize that his plan for the perfect murder was something considerably less than that. It was good chiefly in that it provided him with an alibi. It had served to divert suspicion, at first glance, from himself, and point to another, unknown culprit. But he had counted on the fact that there would be no one, friend or relative, who would inquire closely, or even be greatly interested in the death of Helen Conway. Already this girl had managed to point at least a tiny finger of suspicion at him. What would her next move be?

She's going to do it, he thought. I don't know why or when or how, but she's going to do it. She's going to hang me.

"I must say I feel a lot better than I did." The voice came from the top of the stairs, and Conway turned and watched her as she descended. She was a far cry from the girl Helen had described as a "cold little fish." She was dark, with large brown eyes, and the complete antithesis of Helen's flagrantly blonde amplitude. She was wearing a light silk dress which clung to an enchanting figure, and her hair, freed now of a hat, made a soft frame for the piquant face. The picture held him for only a moment; it was crowded out instantly by the fears and desperate suspicions she aroused in him.

"Why did you fly out here in such a hurry?" he asked.

"I wanted to see if I could be of any help to you. I'd always wanted to meet you, but then of course when Mama

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died, and Helen got so furious, there didn't seem to be much chance of that. You know, you are my only living relative."

Her sincerity was disarming. Conway decided she was going to be more devious than he had expected. "There couldn't have been another reason, could there?" he asked.

"No," she said, a little puzzled at his tone. "That's all."

"A desire to pay your respects to Helen's memory wasn't one of them, obviously." He realized how stuffy he sounded before he even finished the sentence.

"You and I don't have to be hypocritical about that, do we?"

What does she know? he asked himself. What does she mean, you and I? . . . "When was the last time you heard from Helen?" he asked.

"Right after Mama died, when she heard about the will. She wrote me and called me a lot of names and said she never wanted to hear from me again. So she didn't."

"She never wrote you after we moved out here?"

"I didn't even know you had moved."

"Then how did you know where we lived? You seem to have headed for this house like a homing pigeon."

"Well, really," she said with some exasperation, "with your name and picture and address in every paper in town, that wasn't awfully difficult."

"Oh." He felt a little foolish at his inept effort to trap her. "Just what kind of help did you expect to be to me?"

"Why, cook and keep house, and keep people from bothering you. Being a writer, I'm sure you wouldn't be very good at those things yourself. There's something sort of glamorous about a writer."

A sardonic glint came into his eyes. "Your sister didn't think—" He stopped himself just in time. "Helen didn't tell me you were like this," he substituted rather lamely.

That's her plan, he thought. To trap in the course of casual conversation; to lead him on until he revealed his true feeling about Helen. He believed now that Helen had not written her, but he knew also that she had some suspicion which she was determined to confirm. She was beguiling, easy to talk to, and it was inevitable that if he did talk to her he would betray himself.

"You can't stay here," he said abruptly.

"What?" She was taken aback at the sudden harshness in his voice. "What is it? You act as if you're afraid of me."

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He laughed, as convincingly as he could. "Why should I be afraid of you?"

"I don't know," she said thoughtfully.

"I haven't had any lunch," he said. "Maybe that's why I'm a little edgy. How about you?"

"I thought that's what's wrong with you," she said. "But you've been cross-questioning me so much I haven't had a chance to suggest it. I'll get it right away. You see, I told you I could be a help."

The meal was good, but the luncheon could hardly have been called a success. It was eaten in almost complete silence. Conway volunteered no conversation, fearing that he might make some slip, and warily responded to her efforts with no more than a "Yes" or "No." When they had finished she insisted on washing the dishes, and Conway felt that his safest course was to retire to his room.

It was almost an hour before she tapped on the door. "I didn't sleep a wink on the plane, and it's suddenly hit me," she said. "I'm so sleepy I could die. I'll just take a little nap and then I'll be fine, and I can get going."

Conway started to remonstrate, but the door closed, and a moment later he heard the door of Helen's room being shut.

At least, she had agreed to leave, he thought. That was not the entire solution to the problem, but it was something. He paced the room, his tormented brain trying to plan a new strategy which would enable him to cope with this unexpected menace . . .

When the doorbell rang he was astonished to discover that it was after four o'clock. His surprise was succeeded by anger that he had allowed Betty to sleep away the afternoon, and he rapped sharply on her door before going downstairs. He was not unprepared to find that his caller was Sergeant Bauer.

"Has she gone?" the detective asked in a stage whisper.

"Not yet. She's been asleep."

"What!"

"She said she was passing out for lack of sleep and wanted to take a nap before she went out looking for a place to stay. I got busy and didn't realize how late it was."

"This don't look good, you know—you and a young girl being alone here in this house."

"You're telling me," Conway said.

"Certainly seems funny, her coming here at all."

"I gather she thought it was a matter of family loyalty."

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"Well—" The detective shook his head. "Say, that Taylor that was crossed out in the address book. Know where he worked or anything?"

"I haven't any idea," Conway said with complete truthfulness. "I think he was a salesman of some sort, but I don't even know what he sold."

"Oh. Well, just thought you might save me a little time." The detective wandered into the living room and then turned back to Conway. "Say, I had lunch with Greta and showed her those beat-up gloves."

"Greta?"

"My girl. And you know what she said? She said, 'Good gosh, if a woman was lucky enough to lose one of those, why would she want it back? If she lost one, she could throw the other one away with a clear conscience.' Makes sense. And that's a woman's way of figuring. Gotta take that into account."

"All I know is that my wife was very annoyed at losing the glove, and asked me to go back and look for it," Conway said. "Maybe she wanted to use them for working in the garden."

"Helen? Working in the garden?" Betty smiled incredulously as she came into the room. "She certainly must have changed."

Conway stood in impotent rage as the detective wandered to a window from which the garden was fully visible. It was quite evident that it had felt the ministrations of no loving hands, gloved or ungloved, for a long time.

"She do much gardening?" Bauer asked.

"No." Conway searched for an explanation which the girl would be unable to contradict. "She was always talking about getting at the garden, but she never did anything about it. It was sort of a joke between us."

"I don't get it."

"Don't get what?"

"What the joke was about her not doing any gardening."

"It wasn't funny. It was just sort of a private joke between us—the way you and Greta probably have private jokes."

Is he ribbing me? Conway wondered.

But the sergeant's face was guileless. "We don't have any jokes, Greta and me," he said. "She hasn't got a very good sense of humor."

"Do you mind telling me what this is all about?" Betty asked.

"Nothing," Conway said shortly. "Sergeant, you were going to—"

But Bauer had taken the gloves from his pocket. "It don't make sense to me that anybody would care if they did

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lose one of these gloves," he said. "Any woman would be glad to get rid of them."

Conway caught the quick glance Betty flashed at him. "Any woman except Helen," she said as she examined the gloves. "She could never bear to lose anything, and she never threw anything away."

Startled at this manifest untruth, Conway looked at her, but she was bending over to get a cigarette from the box on the table. He was utterly bewildered. A moment earlier she had intimated, for Bauer's benefit, that *he* was lying; now *she* had lied, to cover up for him.

"No cigarettes," she announced. "I'll really have to get to work on this house." Conway held out a pack of cigarettes and she took one without meeting his eyes.

"I wanted to talk to you about that," Bauer said. "Mr. Conway told me you weren't going to stay here."

"I told Mr. Conway," she said frigidly, "that I would leave as soon as I could find a suitable place to stay. I intended to start looking this afternoon, but he didn't wake me, and I overslept."

"But don't you know it just ain't right, your staying here in this house? What will people say? How does it look to people?" The sergeant was growing exasperated. "I'll tell you how it looks—it don't look decent. Right?" He turned to Conway as he confirmed his own judgment. "Right."

She looked him up and down coolly, impersonally. "Sergeant Bauer, I have looked after my reputation, and my virtue, without the help of the police up to now, and I think I can continue to do so. Right now I'd be much happier without your advice, opinion, or company."

Conway expected that the detective would explode, but he only stood, dumbly. Betty walked to the door, flung it open, picked up Bauer's hat, and held it out to him. He walked to her, took the hat, and, without breaking stride, left. She closed the door firmly behind him.

"People like that do make me angry," she said in a voice remarkably calm.

"Would you mind telling me just why you put on that act?" Conway said.

"Was it that bad?" She shook her head ruefully. "I guess I'm not a very good actress. Anyway, it was good enough for him. It worked."

"What was the idea?"

She looked at him in surprise. "I just wanted to get rid of him and I thought you did, too."

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"I had no particular reason to want to get rid of him."

"My mistake," she said.

"I'd also be interested to know why you said Helen couldn't bear to lose anything and never threw anything away."

She looked at him for a moment before replying. "It seemed like a good idea at the time," she said. Again that dread of hidden danger, the fear of the secret knowledge she possessed, gripped him. "Do you feel like going out, or shall we have dinner here?"

"You do as you like," he said. "I'm having dinner here."

"All right." His rudeness, he noticed, no longer seemed to have any effect. "I'll start getting it."

Dinner was even more silent than lunch had been, and when they were through she said, "You know, you really ought to get out more. You shouldn't stay cooped up in the house."

"May I remind you that my wife has just died and that I'm not exactly in the mood for gay spots?"

"I didn't mean that. As Sergeant Bauer would say, that wouldn't look good. But you could—"

"*I* didn't say it wouldn't look good. I said I'm not in the mood for it."

"Naturally, you're upset because she was murdered. But that doesn't mean you have to put on this big grief act."

He stared at her for several moments before he dared speak. "What are you talking about?" he said.

"You were married for four years, weren't you? Well, after living with her for four years you certainly couldn't have liked her. *Nobody* who'd had four years of Helen could be sorry when it was over, no matter what had to happen to put an end to it."

There was utter candor in her eyes, and he could not face them. "You—you're out of your mind," he said. He fumbled for an excuse and escaped to his room.

What did she know? What did she suspect? How was she planning to trap him? Her seeming honesty and artlessness were so disarming that it was difficult to guard against them. She had to be got out of the house, and quickly; that would help.

But would it be enough?

He was horrified as he realized the implication of what he was thinking. Was that the only way he could save himself—by killing this girl, too? But he wasn't a killer, even though he had murdered Helen. He had no qualms about that; it

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had been his only chance of salvation. Even Betty knew that was justified. Or did she? Had that remark been a trick to decoy him into some damning revelation? She seemed such a completely engaging person, or might have, at another time or place. He couldn't kill her, but what other way out was there? Except that he couldn't get away with it. Even his perfect murder, so carefully contrived, showed signs of coming apart at the seams.

All that meticulous planning, from the first glimmering of the idea after reading about the second strangling murder. The working out of the scheme, more carefully than the plot of any story he had ever written. The determination that the Monterey Theater, and the unlit, little-used parking lot down the street, met all the requirements of the plan.

The selection of a picture Helen would want to see and the playing up to her so that she would go to it with him. The visit to a theater on the other side of the city the preceding night in order to see the picture, time it, learn when they would have to leave. The expedient of arriving at the theater in time to see the last five minutes of the picture, and Helen's refusal to go in then, and his fear that he might have to abandon the whole project.

Helen's insistence that they go to the drug store for coffee and his discovery that she was carrying the money she had taken—"stolen" was the word, really—from their joint account. The quarrel which ensued, and the waitress who came so close to overhearing it. The return to the theater, the finding of seats near the rear, the placing under the seat of the glove he had filched from Helen's drawer.

The tingling premonition of success as he was able to persuade Helen to leave five minutes before the end of the picture; the certainty of it as they walked through the lobby unobserved even by the doorman. The walk back to the parking lot, the last walk Helen would ever take; her gibes and taunts on the way, the last he would have to endure.

But he couldn't do it again. He couldn't go through with it, no matter how well planned, however certain he might be of escaping detection. The awful moment in the car when he had pulled the scarf taut around her throat. The fear and hatred in her eyes when she had twisted, her gloved hands clawing, to look at him. The endless moments of waiting for her struggles to cease and the terror that someone, leaving the theater before the end of the

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picture, would return to the parking lot.

The nerve-racking drive those few feet down the alley, in blackness, to the rear of the plumbing shop, and backing the car into the area alongside two of the plumbers' trucks, so that from the alley it appeared to be a third truck. The ghoulish sensation as he removed the gloves from her still warm hands and substituted the mate to the one he had dropped in the theater. The sudden recollection of the money in her purse, the realization that it had not been covered by the plan, and the decision that he must take it.

The surprise at how heavy the once familiar body had become, as he lifted it over the back of the seat and deposited it on the floor, covering it with the polo coat he had persuaded her to bring along. The stealthy walk through the passageway which led to the street; the supreme effort to appear unconcerned as he returned to the theater and searched for the glove.

The tension as he waited for the radio squad car, because he needed the police to vouch for his presence at this particular time; the fear that he might not be able to deceive them and the satisfaction when they regarded him as a man whose wife had run out on him. The panic when he saw them drive down the alley off which the car was parked and the relief as they passed it without a glance.

Everything so far had gone exactly according to plan, but his throat had constricted with dread at the thought of all that still remained to be done.

He could never go through it again; he could never devise another plan as good. But was there any other way out?

He heard Betty go into her room, and a long time after her door closed he went downstairs and made himself a drink. Then, on second thought, he took the bottle of whiskey to his room.

When Conway came downstairs in the morning his place was set at the dining-room table and the coffee pot was simmering on the stove. He poured a cup, drank it black, and poured another, which he took back to the table with him. He started on the papers and the grapefruit which were at his place.

"I didn't hear you come down. I'd have gotten your coffee." The voice came from outside; he looked out to the patio and saw Betty's head peering over the back of the settee on which she had been lying in the sun, out of sight.

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She stood up, and Conway's hangover was dissipated by a new and more dizzying intoxication.

She was wearing very brief shorts and a halter. All that had been promised by the dress she had worn yesterday was now ravishingly fulfilled.

"O-oh, this sun has been so wonderful," she said. "Why don't you get into a pair of shorts and we'll bake in it together?"

Because he found the prospect so inviting he had to be brutal. "Have you any intention of looking for that apartment or are you just planning on staying here indefinitely?"

"Sorry," she said, looking as though she had been slapped. "I'll get dressed."

His remorse was genuine as she left the room. He knew that he dared not let himself be ensnared by a pretty face or an alluring figure or the charm she unquestionably possessed. But could he be wrong? Might she really be as gay and delightful and straightforward as she seemed? He tried to puzzle it out, with an aching head.

It was noon when the doorbell heralded Bauer's arrival.

"I was right near here so I thought I'd drop in and— say, you look terrible."

"What?" Conway's hand automatically went to his face. "Oh, I haven't shaved yet."

Bauer lowered his voice. "Where is she?"

"Went out a couple of hours ago to look for a place to live."

"Good! That's great." The detective's tone changed. "Look, it's none of my business, of course—"

That I don't believe, Conway decided silently. Watch out for this one.

"How much money you got in the bank?" Bauer asked diffidently.

So that was it. "None," Conway said.

The detective's surprise was evident. "Then you know about it?"

"About what?"

"Her withdrawing the money."

"Know about it? Why, of course. The balance in our checking account had gotten pretty low, and they were making a service charge for every check we wrote. So she drew it out and was going to open a savings account, but she wanted to talk to me about it before she did, so she brought the cash home. It's still in the house. I just haven't gotten around to taking it to a bank."

"Not safe, having a lot of money in the house . . . Well, I gotta go." Crestfallen, Bauer

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started through the door.

Press your advantage, Conway thought. He said, "But, Sergeant, what made you think there was something out of line about withdrawing the money? How did you know about it, anyway?"

"I kept thinking about those gloves. It didn't seem sensible, going to all that trouble to find one. So I wondered if maybe she had some idea in the back of her mind, that night, where she wanted to get away from you for a little while, so she sends you on this fool's errand. Naturally, I don't know what the idea is; I need more facts.

"Well, I got a pretty good pair of eyes in my head, and yesterday I see a bank envelope in her drawer. When you got the facts about people's money, you got one of the most important facts about anybody. So I check with the bank this morning and find out she made the withdrawal the day before she was killed. Okay, so that's a fact. But"—he shook his head sadly—"the trouble is, it don't fit in right; at least, not the way I thought it was going to "

He cast off the momentary blow to his deductive ability. "Now I got to go over and see Elsie Daniels and her boy friend again," he announced.

"Who?"

"The ones that saw the car being parked. I want to talk to 'em together. Maybe they'll remind each other of something they didn't remember when I talked to 'em separately."

Conway watched the detective walk down the steps and thought of the vitally important part the couple had played in his scheme. He remembered his fears as he drove the car away from the plumbing shop. The car had not been officially reported stolen, but the squad car had the license number and description. He had to hurry, for timing was the essence of his plan, and any delays, an accident, a minor traffic violation, anything which might bring him into contact with the police, would be disastrous.

It was a three-mile drive to the place he intended to leave the car, a block chosen because the single family dwellings all had porches, most of which, on the nights he had reconnoitered it, had been in use. But when he had turned into the block he was dismayed to see no one on the porches. The unexpected coolness had apparently emptied them. Finally, near the end of the block, and silhouetted against a window, he had seen one couple. He parked in front of the house, pulling close to the curb so that a fender scraped loudly. They could not help noticing the car.

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He had locked the doors of the car and sauntered off. But after he had turned the corner his pace had accelerated surprisingly. Conway had only one athletic accomplishment, the speed with which he could walk, and this was the crux of his plan. He would have had a thirteen-minute wait for the bus after the squad car had left him, followed by an eleven-minute ride to Santa Monica and Wilcox, which was the corner nearest the police station. Ten and a half minutes had elapsed since the police car had left him; there remained thirteen and a half minutes to walk the one and four-tenths miles to where he would have got off the bus to go to the station house. It meant walking at the rate of a mile in less than ten minutes, an almost impossible performance.

Conway had counted on the fact that the police would believe it impossible for him. That was part of the plan. He had not expected that the couple would establish the time as exactly as they had, but that was not necessary; so long as they knew the approximate time it would appear inconceivable that he could have talked to the squad-car men, parked his car, and appeared at the police station within the space of twenty-four minutes.

His legs ached even now at the thought of that walk. He had rehearsed walking a measured mile, not quite to his satisfaction, but he had been sure he could do it when he had to. But he had slowed down just once when he had thrown the hat he had worn into the deep grass of a vacant lot. He had done the same thing with the towel he had stuffed under his coat, to give himself the appearance of being almost hunchbacked. He had not dared to run. Nothing would have been more conspicuous.

He had reached Santa Monica Boulevard, panting and drenched with perspiration, just in time to see the bus on which he should have ridden go past the corner without stopping. It had halted at the next corner and he was able to see the passengers alighting. He was at the police station exactly when he should have been, and the time was noted on the report. It had all been exactly according to plan.

By late afternoon the more acute agonies in Conway's skull had subsided, and he walked to the market to stock up on food. When he returned he went in the kitchen door, stowed away his purchases, and then, walking through the dining room, heard voices.

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On the patio, and apparently on the best of terms, were Betty and the sergeant. The increasingly familiar terror crept over him. What had the girl told Bauer? He unlocked the door and stepped out to the patio.

"This looks very cozy," he said.

"I was just driving by when I happened to notice Betty sitting on the front porch," Bauer explained.

"You locked me out," she said.

"So I wondered why she was sitting there, and it looked like a good chance to clear up the misunderstanding we had yesterday. It's okay now, eh, Betty?"

"Yes," she said. "I didn't understand."

"It's just that she don't look like anybody's sister-in-law."

"Very nicely put," said Conway.

"And she found an apartment, so that fixes everything," the detective said.

"I don't know if it does," she said. "I didn't tell you this. I can't move in until tomorrow. Do you think it will be all right to stay here till then?" She looked at both men.

"I guess so," Bauer said cautiously.

Another day, Conway thought. Could he keep from making a slip for another twenty-four hours? He wavered between his desire to get her out of the house and his fear that Bauer might find his urgency suspect. "If you don't mind," he said, "it's all right with me."

"Thanks," Betty said. "Then I think I'll go upstairs and freshen up a little. You two probably want to talk, anyway."

As she went into the house Conway searched for some hidden meaning in the remark, but Bauer appeared to be his most placid self. "What's been happening? Anything new?" Conway asked.

"Nah. I been using up energy and gasoline and getting nowhere."

"How about Taylor? Have you found him?"

"Nah. Like I told you, I don't think it makes any difference if we find him or not. It only makes me mad that we ain't been able to."

"How did you make out with the girl? What was her name—Elsie Daniels?—the one who saw the murderer park the car?"

"Oh, her." The sergeant's voice expressed his scorn for Miss Daniels. "It's a good thing I talked to the two of 'em separately first, or I'd never of got anything. All they could do

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was hold hands and paw each other and giggle. Like when I said, 'It was a few minutes after ten when you saw the car park, right?' she says, 'Oh, it don't seem like it could of been as late as that, does it, hon?' and she giggles, and he giggles, and she nuzzles herself into his neck, and I wished I could slap a pair of bracelets on 'em with a ten-foot pole in between."

"So you got nothing new out of them?"

"Nah. It's lucky a political speech happened to come on the radio. Otherwise they wouldn't of known if it was ten o'clock or Tuesday."

Conway thought of the importance he had placed on having witnesses to the time the car was parked, and realized how dangerously close he had come to having nothing of the sort. If the detective was right, his fate had rested in the laps of two lovesick morons.

"While I think of it," the detective said, "I went around to the drug store opposite the theater. You know—where you and your wife had coffee that night. The waitress thought you were having an argument about her scarf."

"It wasn't an argument," Conway said. "It was a little misunderstanding. You remember I told you we'd withdrawn the money from the bank."

Conway noticed that Betty had appeared in the doorway, and he was suddenly reminded that he still did not know what she had told the detective in his absence. But he had to continue, and it was wise, he decided, to tell the truth, or at least a semblance of it.

"When we left the house to go to dinner I asked her if she had some money. I only had a few bucks in my pocket. I guess she thought I asked if she had *the* money. In the drug store, when I found I just had a little change, she opened her purse and I saw the whole roll of money. I said something to the effect that she was asking to get hit over the head, and she said, 'You take it if you think I'm apt to get hit over the head,' but just then the waitress came up. I signaled Helen not to show the money, because I didn't want her flashing it in the drug store, and I said something to the waitress about the scarf making Helen look like a target, in order to cover up. Then, when we got to the theater, she gave me the money."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Bauer demanded. "Don't you see what happened? Some guy saw her with that roll, thought she still had it after the movie, and knocked her off for it."

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Conway realized he had been stupid not to mention it; he had been so wrapped up in his original plan that he had failed to take advantage of an accident which would have served to divert suspicion even further from himself. But it was too late now to be of use; since he had not spoken of it before, it was necessary to minimize its importance.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "it was so trivial I'd forgotten about it. And I'm sure nobody saw it. She only took the dollar out of her bag, and I happened to see the rest of the money in the wallet. I'll bet even the waitress didn't see it, did she?"

"She didn't mention it," Bauer admitted.

When the sergeant left a few minutes later, Conway's spirits rose. He was confident now that he could deal with anything Bauer might uncover. And Betty, obviously, had said nothing of any importance.

He was smiling as he turned to her. "Do you think you could dally with a steak for dinner?" he asked. "I got a couple of rather handsome ones this afternoon."

"Sounds wonderful," she said soberly.

"We might have dinner out here," he went on. "But first I'm going to make a cocktail or two. I think we're entitled to it."

"Yes," she said slowly, "I guess you are."

They ate by candlelight in the little patio, screened from the wind and the prying eyes of any neighbors. Betty kept the conversation away from the murder or any mention of Helen, and Conway was able to let down his guard and enjoy himself. It was, he realized, the first human companionship he had taken pleasure from in many months.

She poured the coffee and he held a match for her cigarette. Looking at the lovely oval of her face in the amber glow of the candlelight he wanted to make amends for his churlishness since her arrival.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"Fine, thanks." She smiled up at him.

"Can I get you a brandy? It was a wonderful dinner. We ought to top it off with something."

"No, thanks. I don't want to be any more confused. I've been too much so for the past couple of days."

"You're being very cryptic," he said.

"I won't be any more," she said. "I want to get everything straight. Because I can't stand your being suspicious of me, as you've been ever since I got

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here. Oh, you had reason to be. I can see that now. But it never occurred to me. And that's what I want to straighten out."

She was leaning toward him, eager sincerity shining in her eyes, and she looked very young. She hesitated a moment, then took a deep breath. "When I first heard, on the radio, of Helen's—death, there were no details at all. It never occurred to me that you might have killed her."

"What!" He had expected almost anything, but he was not prepared for such frankness.

"Please," she said. "I caught the first plane I could. I just wanted to help you, in any way I could. I know what Helen was really like. It wasn't that I hated her. It's just that there was something all wrong with her."

"You haven't seen Helen for five years. How can you be so positive of what she was like? People change, you know."

Betty nodded. "I even began to believe that, for a while. You were pretty convincing, and then it seemed to me you started overdoing it. The thing you told Bauer about Helen's gardening, and the glove, for example. And there was another thing I couldn't understand. Why you were so terribly rude, so frightfully anxious to get rid of me. And then when I got here tonight that detective talked to me."

"What did you tell him?"

"I didn't tell him anything. I said he talked to me."

"What did he say?"

"He was very apologetic about his insinuations of yesterday. And then he said he liked you, and my being here made it very tough on him and the police department. Because if the neighbors or anybody found out about it, and it got to the papers, it would throw suspicion on you right away, and then the police would have to do a lot of investigating, which would be very unpleasant for you, even though they knew you were innocent. And then I suddenly realized that you had a perfectly good reason for wanting to get rid of me, because if they started investigating too much it could be a whole lot more unpleasant. So I knew I'd better get out of here—and quick."

"That, unfortunately, makes sense," he said. "And it's the first thing you've said that does," he added. "It's not that I have anything to hide. But the newspapers would have a field day if they found out that an attractive young woman had moved in with me the day after my wife's body was found. I don't know what they'd make of the fact that she was my half

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sister-in-law, but you can be sure it would be something nasty. So, much as I'd like you to stay here—"

"Shall I go to a hotel tonight?"

He considered for a moment, and decided he had overestimated her as a source of danger. "I don't think it's as urgent as that," he said.

"I've certainly messed things up," she said.

"You haven't," Conway assured her. "And I'm grateful to you for wanting to be on my side."

She came over and sat beside him on the settee. "Thank you for saying that," she said. "It's been so awful for you, and all I've done is complicate things when I really wanted to be of some help, in some way. Please believe me."

She was very close; he looked down at the soft warm eyes, the red, inviting mouth, and it was inevitable. His arms went round her and their lips met, gently at first, then with increasing ardor.

She drew away and looked up at him gravely. "You didn't love her, did you?"

"No," he said, and then stopped. Had this whole performance been a trap? He kissed her again. If it was, it was a snare of perfumed velvet and satin and rose petals. This time it was Conway who broke the embrace. "I didn't love her. It wasn't that I couldn't stand her, or that I killed her. I just wasn't in love with her any more."

She sighed contentedly, her head against his shoulder. "I was afraid we were going to be stuck with Bauer all evening. What was all that stuff about the money? And why did you say you never had fights?"

Involuntarily Conway tightened, and he knew that the girl must have felt it, too. "It happened to be true," he said, and realized that his voice had taken on an aggressive note. He was instantly conscious of his mistake; it was essential that she be convinced of his love for her; it was necessary to encourage this love she had so surprisingly offered. He stroked her hair and tried to recapture the earlier mood. "You do like me, don't you?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Of course I do. Since the moment I walked in the door, I guess. You wouldn't know about this, but I've had a sort of a schoolgirl crush on you ever since Helen sent on your picture and told us about you, when you got married. That's partly why I came. But it isn't any good."

She slipped from his arms and stood looking down at him. "Not unless we trust and

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believe in each other. And I don't believe you've told me the truth. I don't blame you for anything you've done—not *anything*. I understand. But if we're to mean something to each other I'd have to know the truth. I'd have to know that you knew you could trust me that much. I can't trust a man who has to be suspicious and on guard every other minute we're together."

"You're wrong," he said without hesitation. He looked at her then. The brown eyes were guileless; she was a figure of utter enchantment, offering him love and tenderness and understanding, and for a moment the prospect was tempting. Then he brought himself up sharply and realized he was being naive. The alluring charm might be bait, the promised tender raptures could be the promise of a noose around his neck. The gamble was too great: he had to play it alone.

"I've told you the truth," he said. "I had nothing to do with Helen's death."

"Please," she said. "Don't tell me if you can't trust me. Just don't lie to me." She stabbed out her cigarette. "It's getting late. I'm going up to bed."

He looked at the slim loveliness silhouetted in the light from inside, and moved toward her. Gradually, as though in spite of herself, she responded to his kiss. But when she drew away she looked at him with cool composure.

"Just to save any embarrassment," she said, "I think I ought to tell you that I'm going to lock my door. Good night."

As she went through the door Conway decided that perhaps it was just as well . . .

Bauer sent a police car in the morning to bring Conway down to the lineup, and he left the house without seeing Betty. He skimmed through the papers as he rode downtown. One carried the story on page three, another on page five, and neither said anything that had not been said in every account since the discovery of the body. Clearly, the case was fading out of the public eye.

After an acutely depressing half hour at the lineup an assortment of unfortunates appeared who, as a group, were indistinguishable from any of the others who had preceded them. Bauer leaned to Conway.

"Anybody there look familiar?"

"Not a soul."

"You sure?"

Conway realized that there was someone in this group the detective expected him to identify. He looked searching-

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ly at each individual, but when he had gone from one end of the line to the other, and back again, he was forced to turn to Bauer and shake his head.

"Okay," the detective said; "let's get out of here. We're going down to Ramsden's office."

The captain was evidently expecting them. "Good morning, Mr. Conway. Have a chair." He turned to Bauer. "Well?"

"He claims he didn't recognize him."

"Really?" Ramsden looked at Conway. "I can understand your reticence, Mr. Conway," he said, "your desire, now that she's dead, to protect your wife's reputation as best you can, regardless of your personal feelings in the matter. But I have to remind you that you may be obstructing justice."

"I guess I'm not very bright," Conway said, thoroughly puzzled. "Could you tell me in words of one syllable?"

"There's no point in playing dumb," Bauer said. "You saw him. We finally picked him up last night. You never saw a scareder guy than Harry Taylor. But we got the whole story."

"Harry Taylor? Why are you holding him?"

"I want the truth, Mr. Conway," the captain said. "Didn't you know that your wife had been seeing a good deal of Taylor recently?"

"I don't believe it!"

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, but it's true," Ramsden said. "Taylor's job keeps him out of town four or five days a week. That's one reason it's taken us so long to find him. But on the days, and nights, he was in town your wife spent a great deal of time with him. They were *very* good friends, Mr. Conway, if you know what I mean. He's admitted it."

Conway felt as if he had been hit in the pit of the stomach. He knew that he must think clearly, logically, that he must determine how this incredible revelation might affect him. But his thoughts, at the moment, were beyond discipline. How much had Taylor told them? How much did Taylor know? *What did Taylor know that he, himself, did not?*

One fact emerged clearly: his whole plan had been based on the fact that he and Helen were an island alone in this community; that they had no intimates, no confidants, who could give the lie to his version of their relationship. Now, suddenly, there had appeared someone who had been much closer to Helen than himself.

The shock of the disclosure

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was so great that it did not occur to Conway that he should act like a trusting husband who has just learned of his wife's perfidy. But the emotions his face revealed must have seemed valid enough to the two detectives. They sat in silence as he struggled to assay the full meaning of the horrifying discovery. It was Bauer who finally spoke.

"I guess maybe he really didn't know," he said to Ramsden. "I don't see how a guy could help knowing if a thing like that was going on, but it looks like he didn't."

"You didn't know she was seeing Taylor at all?" Ramsden asked.

"I—I still can't believe it. What did Taylor say?"

"Had you and your wife discussed a divorce?"

"No, of course not."

"Taylor says she was going to divorce you and marry him."

"What!"

"He says she was going to divorce you as soon as she got a little money, which she expected to be soon."

So Taylor knew about the money. And if he knew that, he probably knew all the rest—the quarrels, the threats. But it was Taylor's word against his, and the word of a husband would carry greater weight than that of a paramour.

"He's lying," Conway said. "I don't believe any of it."

"About that, maybe he is," Ramsden admitted. "But not about the essentials. She's been going to see him for almost three months. The apartment superintendent identified her from her picture. When we told Mr. Taylor we knew that, the young man saw he was really in a jam and started to talk."

"A jam?" Conway's head began to clear; somewhat incredulously he realized that the detectives' suspicions were directed, not at himself, but at Taylor. "You mean you think he was the—that he had something to do with it?"

"That would be a pretty good guess, wouldn't it?"

Conway's mouth was dry and perspiration stood out on his forehead. He realized he was treading on dangerous ground, but he had to know more. Did they really believe Taylor had done it, or was this all merely a screen for their suspicion of himself?

"But you must have more to go on than you've told me. You can't convict a man just because he thought she was going to divorce me and marry him, if he did think that."

"Hardly," Ramsden said. "But it's something to start from. We don't know the motive yet, but there's a pretty

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good chance we can find one."

"You could say I had a motive." He had to take the chance, had to find out where he stood. "I didn't have until two minutes ago, and I wouldn't have killed her, or anyone else, for that reason. But you might say I had a motive."

"Yeah, you might of had," Bauer said quietly.

Conway glanced quickly at the sergeant, frightened by something in his voice. but he plunged on because, having gone this far, he dared not to stop: "Where does he say he was? Hasn't he some alibi?"

"Yes," Ramsden said. "Claims he was in San Bernardino that night, on business. We're checking it now. Of course, he's had four days to fake a story, or he may even have planned it in advance."

"That's the difference between you and him." Bauer sat on the edge of the desk and smiled, and Conway's pulse began to resume its normal beat. "Even if you had a motive you had an alibi you couldn't of faked. I know—I checked it. That's what makes a good detective, being able to tell the real thing from the phonies. Right, Captain?"

"Now that you've told Mr. Conway the secret of your success," Ramsden said, "I think you might go out to his house and take another look around. See if you can find any letters or phone numbers, anything at all that hasn't been covered. If Mr. Conway didn't know about Taylor there may be other things that escaped his notice."

Larkin was waiting in the outer office. "They're releasing Mr. Conway's car to him," Bauer said. "Meet me out at his house. I'll ride out with him."

They walked down the corridor in silence. Free of the terror which had gripped him in Ramsden's office, Conway could think calmly. His predominant emotion was one of anger at himself, at his stupidity in not knowing of the affair with Taylor. He could have divorced her with no trouble at all, and thus have been spared the worry and strain of this past week, of the past two months, for that matter. The fact that Helen might also have preferred to be alive rather than dead did not occur to him.

Bauer's voice broke in on his reflections. "I don't understand," he said, "how a fellow's wife could be pulling a thing like that and him not get on to it."

"It's hard to believe," Conway said. "But, you see, I worked a lot at night. It got pretty dull for her sitting home

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every evening, so she used to go to the movies. I think she really did, at first. Lately, well, I guess she didn't see as many movies as I thought."

"Um-m."

"The captain seemed to think Taylor might be able to fake an alibi. Isn't that pretty hard to do?"

"Practically impossible," Bauer said. "Unless there are a lot of awful dumb detectives around."

Conway felt encouraged to go on. "I didn't understand what you said in the office about my having an alibi. It never occurred to me that I might need one."

"The car was parked at ten four and you were at the police station at ten eighteen. No taxis picked up any fares around there at that time, and there's been no report of a private car giving anybody a lift. Besides, nobody who'd just left a dead body in a car would be fool enough to ask for a lift. And a man running down a quiet street couldn't help but be noticed. So if it was you parked that car it means you'd have to of walked to the station in fourteen minutes. Well, that can't be done. I checked it personally, so there's no possibility of me being wrong."

"I'd never have thought of that," Conway said.

"There was another thing," the detective continued. "You just happened to mention that when you were on that bus you missed the stop at Wilcox and had to ride on to Cahuenga. You didn't even know it meant anything when you told me. Well, whaddya know, the bus driver was coming down with the flu that night and in a hurry to finish his run, and he remembered he beat a light at Wilcox. Somebody bawled him out for it when he stopped at Cahuenga. So you see why I said you had an alibi you couldn't of faked?"

"I didn't realize you'd gone to so much trouble on my account, Sergeant," Conway said in all honesty. "And I'm truly grateful to you. You haven't missed a trick."

When they arrived at the house they found Betty listening to a speech on the radio.

"What's that?" Bauer demanded. "Couldn't you get a ball game?"

"I didn't try," Betty answered. "That's the Governor."

"Rebroadcasting that speech he made last night?" Conway asked.

Betty nodded. "They're rebroadcasting it at a more convenient time. That's what the man said."

Conway turned to Bauer. "Do you want to start looking

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around?" he asked.

"Hm-m?" A faraway look had come into the detective's eyes, and he seemed to recall himself with an effort. "Oh, yeah," he said rather uncertainly.

"Looking around?" Betty asked.

Conway was about to explain when Bauer interrupted. "I just happened to think of something," he said. "I forgot it was Saturday—something I got to do before noon." He was on his way to the door. "The other thing can wait. I'll be out this afternoon sometime."

Conway wondered what new inspiration had struck the detective, but Betty was more practical. "At least, we don't have to ask him to lunch," she observed.

In the afternoon he lent Betty the car to move her luggage to the new apartment, and thought it wise to ask her to come back and have dinner with him after she had settled in it. Late in the afternoon he walked to the market to replenish his supply of food; from halfway down the block, as he returned, he saw her turn into the driveway. She must have hurried to get back so early, he reflected, and decided it was a favorable omen. Her natural impulse had triumphed over her resentment of the night before.

But there was a certain constraint between them, and they talked little until after dinner. Then he told her what he had learned of Helen and Taylor.

She exhibited no surprise. "You didn't suspect anything?" she asked.

"It never occurred to me. That's what worried me this morning—that they wouldn't believe me; that they'd think they'd found a motive for me to kill her; and then go on from there."

"You don't have to worry," Betty said. "They know you didn't kill her, because they're convinced you couldn't have. Bauer told me yesterday. It comes down to the fact that you couldn't be in two places at the same time—or practically the same time."

"I know. He told me this morning."

"Do you mind very much?" she said after a moment. "About Helen and this man, I mean. I know it must have been a shock, but do you care terribly?"

"I don't care anything about any woman in the world, except you," he said.

"Oh, my darling—" She was at his side in an instant. "I've so needed to hear that." Her lips

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entreated a kiss and her arms encircled him fiercely. Then, "I've needed that even more," she said.

"I wasn't sure, after last night," he said. "I didn't know how you felt about it today."

"I couldn't stop loving you overnight. And this afternoon, when I came back here, I saw you walking toward the house, and I began to tingle all over. Because I'd never seen anyone walk so fast, and so effortlessly, and I thought it was for me, because you wanted to get to me—"

He stopped her voice with his lips, and he knew that she must be stilled forever. Even now she didn't comprehend, but she had the key. Inevitably, she would give it away. He had no choice—he had to kill her.

How? That would take thought, planning. But he dared not let her out of his sight; he had to bind her to him for the little while which remained.

"It *was* for you, my dearest," he whispered. "I hate every moment I'm not with you. If it weren't for the scandal, for you as well as me, we could get married tonight." A sudden thought struck him, the beginning of a half-formed plan. "Perhaps we could anyway, secretly, in Arizona or Nevada."

"It would be wonderful," she said, and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "But we'll have to think it over very carefully. We'll talk about it tomorrow, after we sleep on it."

"We can think about it and talk about it on the way to Yuma or Las Vegas," Conway said, and tilted her lips to his. "I don't have to think about it at all."

The shrill clangor of the doorbell echoed from the house and they sprang apart guiltily. "It's Bauer," Conway said. "I'd forgotten all about him. Stay here. I'll get rid of him as soon as I can."

It was not Bauer, but Larkin and another detective whom Conway saw when he opened the door.

"Want you at headquarters right away," Larkin said.

"What's up?"

"I dunno. They never tell me anything."

"I'll get a coat and turn out some of these lights," Conway said. He went into the dining room and noticed Larkin moved to keep him in view. He stepped out onto the patio and blew out the two candles which were still on the table. Betty, on the settee, was out of sight of the detective.

"I have to go to headquarters," he whispered. "Wait for me, my darling." In the darkness he saw her nod her

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head. "I won't be long." He pretended to lock the door to the patio, picked up a coat, and rejoined the detectives in the hall.

The two men accompanied him to Ramsden's office, and Larkin motioned for Conway to enter.

Ramsden, seated behind the desk, looked steadily at him as he came in.

"Good evening, Captain," Conway said.

"Hello, Conway." Bauer was seated at one side of the captain's desk and a young man at the other; Ramsden indicated the young man. "This is Mr. Davis," he said, and Conway noted that he was tall and thin, with a very high forehead and a collar to match. "He's the assistant district attorney," Ramsden continued.

"Good evening, Mr. Davis," Conway said, and felt his throat begin to tighten even as he spoke.

"Hello, Conway," Davis said. "I understand you murdered your wife."

"What!"

"That's right, Conway," Ramsden said.

Davis rose from his chair. "Sit down, Conway." Larkin brought a chair and Conway sank into it. "We've got the whole thing figured out," Davis said as he sat on the edge of Ramsden's desk. "You might as well make a full confession."

He's bluffing, Conway thought. They've got something, but he's bluffing. He remembered the other times he had almost panicked because of something Bauer had said or done, and resolved that it would not happen again. "I don't know how much you know about this case, Mr. Davis," he was able to say in an almost completely normal voice. "But I didn't murder my wife, and the captain and the sergeant know that I couldn't have. They just happened to mention that only this morning."

"That was this morning," Ramsden said.

"Look, pal," Bauer said, "there was a little mistake made—a lucky mistake for you, up to now. You been on borrowed time since the day after the body was discovered. If it hadn't been that somebody put the right facts together wrong, I'd of had this wrapped up in twenty-four hours."

"Would someone mind translating this doubletalk?" Conway asked.

"We'll begin at the beginning," Davis said. "In the drug store, when you had to ask your wife for money to pay the check. She was careless and you saw that she had a roll. You

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asked where she'd gotten it, and because she wasn't sticking with you much longer anyway, and didn't care what you thought about it, she told you. She told you that she'd cleaned out your joint account, so naturally you got sore and you had a fight. That we label Motive Number One."

"One hundred percent wrong so far," Conway said. "I knew about the money an hour after she'd withdrawn it. I got a little upset because she was carrying it around. I told the sergeant all this."

"Yeah," Bauer said. "You told me."

Davis appeared not to have heard the interruption. "Naturally, after that you were in no mood to go to a movie. Nor was she. So you went back to the car. Somehow you found out about the affair with Taylor. I imagine she probably taunted you with it; she was through with you, anyway. Motive Number Two."

"Wait a minute," Bauer broke in. "I got it. That orange scarf she was wearing, that you didn't like—" He turned to Davis. "He told the waitress he couldn't stand it and they were arguing about it. I don't know if I told you before, but Taylor gave her that. So here's what happened. Conway's beefing about the scarf, and she says, 'You got good reason not to like it, if you only knew.' So he wants to know what she's talking about, and she lets him have it. One thing leads to another, and—"

He turned to Conway. "That's when you killed her, figuring the scarf made it poetic justice."

"I think that's probably just about it, Sergeant," Davis said. "How about it, Conway?"

"You couldn't be more wrong if you tried," Conway said. "But I guess you are trying, at that. For your information, until this moment I didn't know anything about that scarf."

"There seem to have been a lot of things you didn't know about," Ramsden interjected.

"At any rate," Davis continued, "you took the scarf and choked her and killed her. And then you snapped out of your murderous rage and realized you had a dead body in the car. You drove around for a while, wondering what to do about it, and then you remembered these strangling murders and you got this bright idea. You figured it all out, and you figured out you could make it look like one of them, and get away with it. So you just parked the car on the first quiet street you came to and went back to the theater."

"Let's stop kidding," Con-

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way said. "I don't know what you're driving at, but it certainly can't be that you believe I did this thing. The car was parked at ten four, remember? And you, yourself, Sergeant, said I couldn't have done it then."

"That's right," Bauer said. "You couldn't have done it if the car was parked at ten four. *If.* That's what threw me and you must of had a good laugh when you found out that's what we were going on. But that car wasn't parked at ten four, it was parked at *nine* four, as I found out only this afternoon. So now d'you see what's changed since this morning?"

Conway looked at them incredulously. "What did you do—bribe that couple to change their story?"

"Wait a minute, Conway—" Ramsden half rose from his chair. "We've taken enough lip from you."

"Don't you go talking about bribes," Bauer said sternly. "Matter of fact, it was you tipped me off. You remember, you were talking about rebroadcasts this morning? It must of been your unconscious, thinking about it. Anyhow, I did a little checking up.

"Remember, we were here in this office the day the body was found, and I said this Elsie Daniels told me they'd been listening to Senator Graham when they saw the car being parked. Well, somebody"—there was a barely perceptible glance at Ramsden—"figured that made it ten o'clock, because that's when most people heard the speech. But"—the sergeant paused professorially—"that was not a fact. Senator Graham's speech was broadcast from two local stations at ten o'clock, all right. But those were rebroadcasts. Today I found out it was a broadcast at *nine* o'clock from a Denver station.

"The other day, when I told Elsie and her boy friend it was ten o'clock when the car stopped, they both said, 'Oh, it couldn't of been as late as that.' Well, it turns out they were right. What happened was, they intended to tune in KNX, but they got Denver instead, which just happens to be right next to KNX on the dial. So today, when I asked 'em again about the time, they were positive it wasn't ten. So it must have been nine, which all adds up and makes sense. At nine four, or very close to it," he was addressing Conway now, "you parked your car with your wife's body in it, got out, and walked away."

"Wait a minute," Conway interrupted, "the car wasn't

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parked at nine o'clock, because it was still in the parking lot. And I didn't park it at nine or ten or any other time. Why don't you look for the man who did—that hunchback?"

Davis' glance at Ramsden was somewhat disconcerted.

Bauer, however, did not hesitate. "All you have to do to look like a hunchback is hunch up your coat, hunch over your shoulders, and, see—?" The sergeant demonstrated. "I'm a hunchback."

The others were obviously convinced and the detective continued, "Anyhow, you walked up to Santa Monica Boulevard, which took you about eighteen, twenty minutes. You were loaded with luck, because a bus came along there at nine twenty-two, and you got back to the theater at nine thirty. Just in time to let you see the audience coming out after the picture."

"No trick to it at all," Conway said. "All I had to do was to be in two places at the same time."

"The doorman let you into the lobby," Bauer went on; "you went into the theater, threw the glove under a seat, got the manager, and let him watch you find the glove. All very neat."

"To say the least," Conway said.

"Then you went to the parking lot, found your car gone, went through the motions of looking for your car and your wife, called the police, got on a bus, and went to the police station. Right? Right."

The facts were so wrong, and the deductions made from them so ridiculous, that Conway could almost relax. That he was suspected at all was disturbing, but they were, as yet, so far from knowing the real facts of the murder that he saw no reason to be too perturbed.

"You have a great future as a fiction writer," he said to Bauer. "That makes a very nice story, except that at nine four I was in the movie with my wife, and at nine thirty I walked with her to the parking lot, and the car was there. How do you explain that?"

"Very simply," Davis said. "*You're* the fiction writer. You weren't in the movie at nine four, or any other time, because you didn't go back to the theater after you left the drug store. The doorman remembers you when you started to go in, and your wife found out you were early and called you an idiot and walked off, with you following her. But he didn't see you come back."

"We went back just before the picture started. There was a crowd going in."

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"And neither he nor anyone else saw you leave," Davis continued. "And you said you left before the end of the picture, so there was no crowd coming out then."

"He was—" Conway stopped himself in time. He had said they had left only a minute before the end of the picture; if he said that the doorman was at the popcorn counter when they left he might reveal that they had left not one minute but five minutes early.

"How could the doorman be expected to remember everyone who walked past him in the course of the evening?" he said. "You'd have a fine time convincing a jury that I wasn't in the theater just because the doorman doesn't remember my going in or coming out."

"You've got something there," Davis agreed. "But"—he paused and smiled affably—"the joke's on you. Because I don't have to prove you *weren't* in the theater. You just go ahead and try to prove you *were*. We haven't been able to and"—the smile vanished utterly—"you won't be able to either, *because you weren't there*. But I *can* prove everything else."

"You're nuts," Conway said, but he was rigid with terror. He had selected the seats in the theater with a view to being inconspicuous, so that their early exit would not be noticed; their leaving had attracted no attention, which he had counted as an added bit of luck. He had foreseen no need of having to prove his presence in the theater, for he could not have imagined that a muddle-headed detective would manage to prove, to a presumably sane assistant district attorney, that the crime had taken place an hour earlier than it actually had.

The muddle-headed detective spoke. "Mind if I say something to him?" he asked Davis.

"Go ahead."

"Naturally, you shouldn't of killed her," Bauer began. "But I can see extenuating circumstances."

"You're seeing double," Conway said.

"I knew there was something phony when I saw that glove you said she sent you to get. And, of course, I was right. But that's one of the things makes me think it wasn't premeditated, because if you'd planned it you'd of figured out something better than that, you being a writer and all, so I'm right on that one, too. Well, if it wasn't premeditated, it wasn't first-degree murder. So if you play ball with the D.A., maybe he'll let it go at second-degree. Can't ask for more than that."

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He turned to Davis. "How about it?"

"There do seem to have been some extenuating circumstances," Davis said. "Of course, I can't promise anything, but I'll talk to the boss. That is, if you'll cooperate."

"You're all insane," Conway said, and his voice shook with real outrage, the righteous indignation of the artist who has created a perfect work, only to have it misunderstood, distorted, perverted, by a crass and ignorant public.

"This whole idiotic accusation stems from the fact that this chowderhead detective, advised by his cretin girl friend, thinks it's unnatural for a woman to get upset about losing a glove, even an old worn one. From that magnificent start he's gone on to a series of asinine deductions based on falsified facts. I knew my wife had withdrawn the money from the bank. I didn't know she had it with her until we got to the drug store, but that discovery would hardly put me into a homicidal rage.

"I knew nothing at all about Taylor until I was told about him this morning in this office, and I still don't know if it's true. I was in the theater at nine o'clock and the car was parked at ten. I don't *know* that," he hastened to add, "but that's what you've said right along, and I do know it wasn't parked at nine, because it was in the parking lot and my wife was alive at nine thirty. And there aren't any extenuating circumstances, because there aren't any circumstances at all."

Conway found that he was convincing himself which, after all, was not too surprising, because everything he had said was absolutely true. "All this 'evidence' you think you have is phony from start to finish," he continued, "and if you're silly enough to take me into court I'll prove it to any jury in the world."

"He don't know what he's saying," Bauer said.

"Okay, Conway." Davis turned to Ramsden. "Book him," he said, and started for the door, then stopped and addressed Conway again. "If you change your mind let me know. But make it quick because if you're going to stick to your story and won't cooperate I'm going to let you have the works."

Conway was staring fixedly at the floor of his cell the next morning when he heard the unmistakable rattle of the barred door. He looked up to see a uniformed policeman; beside the officer stood Betty. Conway rose and crossed slowly

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to the door as the policeman retired to the other side of the corridor, in sight, but out of earshot.

"My darling," she said. "My poor darling, what can I do?"

"You've done enough," he said. "The moment I laid eyes on you I knew you were going to hang me. But you're not going to, you understand? You're not going to!"

Her eyes widened at the viciousness of the attack, and the tears began to well into them. "Please don't, my dearest," she said. "I'd have cut my tongue out before I'd have mentioned that rebroadcast if I'd had any idea of the truth, if I'd thought it would give Bauer any sort of clue."

"The rebroadcast had nothing to do with it. And they're crazy if they think they can pin this thing on me."

"If only you'd trusted me," she said. "If only I'd known I'd never have made such a stupid slip." She was silent for a moment as she struggled to gain control of herself. "But I did, and now tell me how I can help you. Who's the best criminal lawyer in town? I'll get him for you, no matter what."

"You can help me in just one way," he said, and his voice was glacial. "Go back to Kansas and stay there and read about what fools I make of that district attorney and the police if they ever bring me to trial for this thing. I don't need the best lawyer in town, and I don't need you and I don't want your help. Go back to Kansas, or go anywhere, but get out of my life."

She stared at him, unbelieving, as she recognized the cold lethal hatred in his eyes. Involuntarily she retreated a step, and was grateful for the bars which separated them. After a long moment she turned away and walked slowly down the corridor. When the policeman caught up to her, she was crying quite unashamedly.

Arthur Conway sat, his head in his hands, as Assistant District Attorney Davis swung into the conclusion of his summing-up to the jury. Conway wondered why he had ever thought of it as a perfect murder; it didn't sound like one as Davis told it.

"The one thing you have to decide is whether this defendant has told the truth," Davis said.

Conway reflected that he had told the truth, and practically nothing but the truth. Not, of course, the whole truth, although he had been closer to it than the prosecution.

"—How can anyone believe

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this man's story that he was in the theater at the time the death car was parked by the murderer?" Davis continued.

How, indeed? Conway wondered. His own attorney hadn't believed him, had urged him to accept the prosecutor's offer right up until the opening of the trial.

But might there be one —*just one*—of those twelve men and women who *had* believed him?

"—His only defense, his only alibi, is that he was in the theater at that time. But he has been unable to produce one single witness to support that alibi—"

That was true, too. And there had been no way to shake the testimony of the couple who established the time the car had been parked—no way, that is, except to reveal that he, himself, had parked it at ten.

"—We have shown that the defendant had a motive, two motives, in fact—"

How can he be so wrong, and yet be so convincing? Conway wondered. He found himself looking at the entire proceeding in a detached fashion, rather like a critic watching a somewhat implausible play. He still found it hard to believe that he could be convicted of a crime, even though he had committed it, on such a web of utterly false and circumstantial evidence.

"—And your duty is to see that this man pays the penalty that the law provides for murder."

The jury did its duty; it was back in less than two hours with its verdict: Guilty. Murder in the First Degree. Without Recommendations.

Arthur Conway vowed to the end, which came shortly after he entered the gas chamber at San Quentin, that he was the victim of the foulest miscarriage of justice in the history of California. And, in a sense, he was.

Was, that is, if you viewed justice as a sort of game, played strictly according to rules, with the method, and not the ultimate result, the important thing. If, on the other hand, you string along with the dictionary definition, then Conway received no more nor less than justice, for he was rendered what was his due. So, in a sense, justice was served, too.

Perhaps it was all according to plan.

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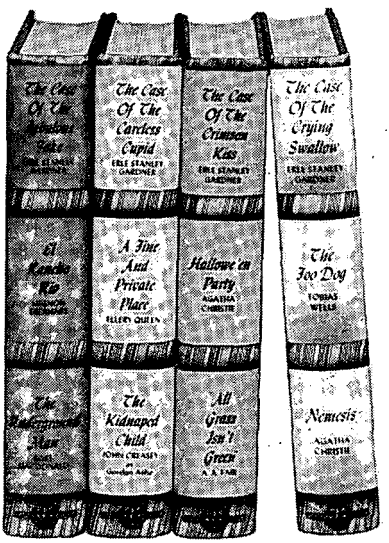
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